“WE CAN’T EVEN PLAY OURSELVES”: MIXED-RACE ACTRESSES IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

AMERICAN STUDIES

AUGUST 2017

By
Valerie M. Lo

Dissertation Committee:
Robert Perkinson, Chairperson
Mari Yoshihara
Jonna Eagle
Konrad Ng
Jonathan Okamura

Keywords: Mixed race, Ambiguity, Post-Racial, Color-blind, Film

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been a test of my resiliency and grew from my desire to add a small contribution to the ongoing discussion of mixed race representations in film and television. Many people have come into my life in the last several years and encouraged my studies, talked excitedly with me, and subtly (or blatantly) pushed me to continue when I thought the road ahead looked too ominous.

In 2005, at San Francisco State University's Asian American Studies banquet, my Master's thesis chair, Wei Ming Dariotis, remarked that a PhD was in the stars for me. Those words stayed close to me during my graduate work at the University of Hawai'i.

My first teaching assistantship with Isabelle Peluad at San Francisco State University in Asian American Literature showed me exactly what I wanted to immerse myself in for the rest of my life. Graduate courses with Russell Jeung and Madeline Hsu reaffirmed my desire to work within the field of Asian American Studies and continue on to a doctorate program.

My coursework in American Studies was rigorous and pushed me out of my comfort zone in the best way. David Stannard, Mari Yoshihara, and Vernadette Gonzalez provided some of the most memorable learning communities within which I have had the pleasure to work. My early teaching was significantly shaped by assisting Vernadette Gonzalez, Robert Perkinson, and Theodore Gonzalves. I am thankful to have had such passionate mentors, particularly Vernadette, who taught me that it is good for students to be uncomfortable and wrestle with complex issues.

The drafts of the dissertation from the proposal through many revisions were greatly supported by Mari Yoshihara, Jonna Eagle, and especially Robert Perkinson. Robert pushed me to grapple with arguments that helped the project continue to grow. More than anyone, Mari

helped with the tedious editing process. Konrad Ng and Jonathan Okamura provided thoughtful responses and support from the initial stages of the project onward.

My years in Hawai'i are among my most cherished. I made lifelong friends within and beyond the American Studies Department. I am immensely appreciative of my cohort members Nicole Suzuki, Sean Trundle, and Mo Wells, and American Studies colleagues Cheryl Beredo, Jeff Tripp, David Doolin, and Kevin Lim. I could not have undergone the rigor of graduate work and teaching plus all of life's pain and exhilaration without the friendship, support, and love from Angela Krattiger, Melissa Rand, Jon Schmitz, and Sean Trundle.

Finally, I thank my parents, who have continuously supported my educational efforts despite the long and winding road I needed to take. I am grateful to my Sensei, Dr. Stevan Gengo, and his continual support of my educational pursuits and martial arts training. My good friend and training partner Eunejune Kim continually encouraged me from our very first conversation about race relations, and commiserated with me when it seemed like no one else understood. My supportive colleagues at City College of San Francisco and San Jose State University, and my family and team at The Park Gym provided encouragement and laughs during the most challenging times. Thank you!

ABSTRACT

At the turn of the twenty-first century, images of mixed race and racial ambiguity were in demand, mixed-race characters were becoming more common on screen, and racially mixed performers were being cast in roles across races. Mainstream media deemed mixed-race performers symbols of racial progress, yet their casting often exposed latent racism, and their characters reflected outdated racial politics. Increased fame, positive media attention, and more acting opportunities were available for mixed performers; however, they often played racially unmarked characters. The inclusion of mixed-race performers and characters based on their ability to be detached from specific racial identities—and appear as no race at all—revealed fractures in racial progressiveness.

Despite breaking racial boundaries for their casting, mixed black and white performers were often placed in roles where the dominant culture and mainstream society's discomfort with speaking frankly about race was replicated on screen. They regularly played characters coded as racially neutral, only partially formed, or based on antiquated stereotypes of tragic or deviant figures. Even in lead roles, mixed characters often lacked families or romances in order to keep race and interracial relationships out of the story. Casting mixed-race performers but coding them as white meant they occupied a white cultural frame at the expense of a black identity revealing white racial hierarchies and persisting racism.

During this era of purported racial progressiveness, actresses Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, and Maya Rudolph achieved unprecedented success for mixed black female performers. Playing roles that spanned races and appealed to wide audiences, the three contributed to a complex reframing of black identity and pushed the boundaries of racial fluidity for mixed performers. However, when cast or coded as black or African, due to the limited onscreen

opportunities for single-race African Americans, their casting revealed pervasive color-blind racism and colorism in Hollywood.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Seeing Mixed Race

During the fall of 2006, the popular mockumentary sitcom *The Office* added racially mixed, up-and-coming actress Rashida Jones to the cast in the role of Karen Filippelli. Like Jones, Karen also appeared to be of mixed race. As recently as 2006, mixed-race characters on television were rare, and I was eager to find out if Karen's background would be addressed on the show. Due to the genre of *The Office*, I did not expect a particularly sensitive treatment of race; on the other hand, since the show had a racially diverse cast, especially in relation to other sitcoms of the era, I expected that Karen's race would contribute to the identity of her character. I was mildly amused, and then frustrated, when Karen's racial ambiguity became the cause for other characters' speculation about her parents' possible illicit relationship, comments about her body, and an awkward coding as Italian American. In creating an Italian American identity for Karen, the show reinforced stereotypes about mixed race and perpetuated the general discomfort many people have around others who are racially mixed and ambiguous. Black TV critics and journalists writing for black media slammed Jones and *The Office* for Jones' racial passing and for Karen not having a black or mixed identity. Yet, mainstream media was relatively silent about the way Karen's identity was awkwardly constructed as if to obscure her non-white ancestry. At the time of the show's release, mainstream media privileged racially ambiguous-appearing celebrities and public figures. Racial specificity was often ignored in favor of emphasizing the physicality of mixed-race people that could stand for any and all races. As someone who enjoyed spotting mixed race on screen but felt uneasy with how it would be addressed, I wanted to examine the ways mixed race was presently being represented, especially when mixed characters were played by mixed performers.

I came of age as mixed race during the 1980s and 1990s; even in racially diverse San Francisco, I lacked a shared racial identity with others. While I am part Asian American (as opposed to part black/African American like the performers analyzed in this dissertation), I share commonalities with the three racially mixed actresses in this project, including a mixed-race identity, particularly one made up of the dominant race and a minority race, and also the fact that we all experienced coming of age at a time when there was a near absence of mixed individuals in daily life and media representations. I was drawn to interviews with Jones, Newton, and Rudolph that discussed their early struggles with identity and isolation, and how their experiences grappling with their racially mixed backgrounds ranged from traumatic (Newton), to conflicted (Jones), to incidental (Rudolph). Finally, the shift in American culture since the 1970s, when I and the three performers were born, meant mixed-race individuals went from being unique, outcasts, and unable to legally identify as more than one race, to being in demand, held up as symbols of racial progress, and allowed to choose how to identify. The current decade has also seen a growing number on-screen roles for the three performers.

The lack of mixed-race images in pop culture led me and other mixed individuals growing up in the post-*Loving*,[1] pre-Hapa[2], pre-Obama era to latch onto and "claim" any mixed person in the public light.[3] Seeing a mixed person was validation that there were others like us. LeiLani Nishime's depiction of the visceral reaction of "spotting" and "outing" a mixed celebrity, which she deems a "guilty pleasure," resonates with my own experiences, and her

[1] *Loving v. Virginia*. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

[2] Hapa with a capital "H" denotes the Hawaiian term "hapa," appropriated by racially mixed Asian Americans on the continental United States. In the Hawaiian language, the "h" in "hapa" is not capitalized and the term means "part" as in "part Hawaiian." In the 1990s, racially mixed Asian Americans claimed the term to celebrate their identities.

[3] See LeiLani Nishime, "Guilty Pleasures: Keanu Reeves, Superman, and Racial Outing," in *East of Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*, eds. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren (New York: New York University Press, 2005) 273. Mixed-race individuals feel a "rush of 'claiming' the hapa star."

work contributes to my discussions of the emotional responses that can come with viewing representations of mixed race. The portrayal of mixed characters has been called a "victory of visibility," especially when their mixed background is written into their character's identity.[4] For instance, arriving with the turn of the twenty-first century, *Showtime*'s acclaimed series *The L Word* centered on a diverse group of queer women. I was thrilled that one of the lead characters, Bette Porter, was racially mixed and played by mixed actress Jennifer Beals.[5] Bette's familial, romantic, and social interactions included complex conversations about race. In an award speech for portraying a biracial lesbian on *The L Word*, Beals commented on the significance of representation: "To know that you exist, and then to know that you exist in a larger, beautiful context, and then finally to know that we all exist as one larger, extended group is very fulfilling."[6] Beals' sentiments mirror those of other mixed individuals and can resonate with any group that has been underrepresented on screen.

Delight at seeing images of mixed race can be coupled with anxiety due to the history of damaging representation.[7] Mixed and non-mixed people of color were oppressed in society and caricatured on screen for the majority of the twentieth century. My youthful fascination with spotting mixed race on screen often outweighed my critique of the common problematic

---

[4] Ralina L. Joseph, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 65. Joseph uses Sarah Warn's analysis of Bette Porter's mixed race on *The L Word.*

[5] Joseph, 65–66. In the last half of Season 6, Mei Melancon, a Chinese, Japanese, and French actress played Jamie Chen. She was the first mixed Asian American character on the show, and the one whose background on and off screen most closely resembled my own.

[6] Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds., *Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary Television* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006), 8.

[7] See Gene Demby and Kat Chow, "Rep Sweats, Or, I Don't Know if I Like This but I Want it to Win," Code Switch: Race and Identity Remixed, NPR, podcast audio, June 22, 2016. "Rep Sweats," coined by comedian Jenny Yang means "sweating over representation . . . worried about the way people like you are portrayed on TV or in the movies." Demby and Chow explain, "Whenever a show with black brown characters comes around there is so much excitement, but there can also be this weird anxiety. What if a show ends up portraying my community in a way I don't like," and "this feeling that a show with a Black cast, or an Asian cast, or a Latino cast can't stand on its own merits and has to stand in for so much more."

constructions of mixed characters. Today, representations of mixed race, primarily mixed African Americans, are more common.[8] However, as this dissertation contends, despite being celebrated, they are not always progressive, and can reinforce latent racism. Further, present day representations of racial mixture that conform to white norms or dismiss black ancestry reveal ruptures in the presumed racial progress in the twenty-first century.

Mixed Race and Fractures in Claims of Turn of the Twenty-First-Century Racial Progress

This dissertation analyzes turn-of-the-twenty-first century film and television representations of mixed-race and racially ambiguous characters played by racially mixed, part black and part white actresses in order to answer the following questions: 1. How are mixed-race, part black and part white characters coded on screen, and how does their mixed identity reveal underlying racial politics of the film or television show? 2. How has the racial coding of characters played by mixed-race actresses Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, and Maya Rudolph changed as their careers progressed, and what does this reveal about the opportunities and limits for racially mixed performers?

Although there has been a growing presence of racially mixed characters in film and on television, and some mixed black and white performers have had successful career trajectories playing a variety of races, examining their presumably mixed-race roles can expose outdated racial politics and color-blind racism that complicate ideas of racial progressiveness. Regularly, mixed-race characters, when played by mixed-race actresses, are cast in ways that obscure their black ancestry, favor racial ambiguity, or represent them as raceless; these characters often lack a full range of emotions and are relegated to being tragic or deviant. When mixed-race characters

[8] The larger number of African Americans compared with Asian Americans means it is more common to see the former on screen.

are marked by black ancestry, mixed race is consistently represented as a burden and synonymous with illicit behavior. However, the prevalence with which racially mixed performers are gaining lead roles as black characters reveals that mixed black can be a privileged black identity. The preference for light skinned actresses in black roles further limits opportunities for single-race and dark skin African American actresses. Black media, viewers, and black journalists writing for mainstream publications have spoken out regarding the way mixed-race performers are used to expand the black racial category and are allowed racial fluidity in ways that single-race African Americans are not.[9] These frustrations persist in the United States, even while these same racially mixed performers are used to stand for racial progress.

As the analyses of roles featuring racially mixed actresses in the following chapters illustrate how Hollywood's treatment of mixed race shows fractures in racial progress. It ranges from misrepresenting its existence, to constructing it as a burden on its characters, to ignoring or glossing over it by not marking characters with a specific racial identity or coding them as white. Mainstream media has responded to these representations with relatively little critical discussion of their problematic constructions and recycled forms; discomfort with speaking frankly about race is replicated on screen in the racial coding and construction of characters. When mixed performers are cast and coded as white or detached from any racial identity, they occupy a white cultural frame at the expense of a black identity. If racially mixed performers gain increased fame, positive media attention, and more acting opportunities because they can successfully play

[9] See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Nina Simone's Face," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016; Latoya Peterson, "Maya Rudolph Stars in Bridesmaids," *Racialicious*, April 20, 2011, accessed July 2, 2015; Kim Crosby, "Chasing the Bluest Eye: Real Talks on Internalized Racism," *Blackgirldangerous*, January 10, 2013, accessed January 13, 2014.

racially unmarked characters, they are only conditionally accepted based on their ability to be detached from black identity.[10]

Though I am focusing this project on part black mixed-race actresses, I am not attempting to appropriate black culture or identity or claim agency to speak for part-black mixed-race individuals. My project's central focus is on mixed-race as a category that is racially derived and descriptive, has physical and visual expectations, possesses ever-changing connotations, and is performed in popular culture. I use film and television to critique the construction of mixed-race characters and roles played by mixed-race performers to show how they reveal fractures in the idea of post-racialism and instead reinforce color-blind racism. As an outsider/observer, I am not affected by the racial discrimination that part-black mixed-race performers endure. Yet, the oppression they suffer has commonalities with other minority groups who are marginalized on screen and in society. Visual representations are powerful. They influence opinions and beliefs regarding people of different backgrounds. My connection to the project relies on my engagement with mixed race as a racial category and field of study. I critique both the erasure of race in mixed-race characters and the privileging of racially unspecific mixed race over individual racial backgrounds. Both valorize whiteness and reaffirm that non-white backgrounds are never desirable.

At no other time in American history have mixed-race individuals in the public light been instilled with such hope while also burdened with the incredible task of advancing and mending race relations. Occurring simultaneously with the emerging decades of the twenty-first century and Barack Obama's presidential campaign and two terms in office, the on-screen careers of mixed black and white performers revealed both acceptance of and limits imposed upon mixed-

[10] See Joseph, 4. The "exceptional multiracial" is a mixed person whose "multiracial blackness is desired for its transcendent quality."

race individuals and their fluid identities. Despite the increasing number of racially mixed people, the preference for ambiguity over racial specificity, more racially mixed performers playing lead roles in Hollywood productions, and Obama's presidential wins, racial divisions and hierarchies remain in place. Some racial progress has been achieved, and racially mixed performers are now being given more opportunities to be in the spotlight and viewed as positive symbols. However, racism is not over, and constructed images of mixed race can reveal the enduring valorization of whiteness over blackness.

This project draws from Ethnic Studies, American Studies, and Film Studies to analyze the career trajectories of three award-winning mixed-race, part black and part white actresses—Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, and Maya Rudolph—who saw increased career success at the turn of the twenty-first century and became symbols of racial progress. The visual representations of mixed race within approximately two decades (1991–2016) of these performers' careers coincide with Obama's election to the presidency and the promise of a post-racial era. Yet, the analysis of the representation of mixed-race individuals in the public light and on screen often affirms that the United States is not as racially progressive as is claimed.

My primary sources are independent and Hollywood films and television shows. The films include genres such as comedy, drama, period pieces, and variations of the romantic comedy, and include films with ensemble casts; the television episodes include comedy, sketch comedy, and mockumentary. All film and television productions were released during the last decade of the 1990s through 2016 and feature at least one of the three performers. The performances analyzed are those released on DVD or streaming media and are available for viewing. These visual texts represent mixed race in ways that reveal latent racism and discomfort with racially mixed individuals. Some of these representations occur in productions where race

and racial difference were not meant to be central or problematic features of the production; others occurred in films that specifically dealt with racial issues, but where the depictions of mixed-race characters remained fraught.

In on-screen performances by Jones, Newton, and Rudolph, I focus on the films and episodes of television shows where each had a featured or lead role or drove the narrative of a particular scene. In the roles analyzed, the actresses themselves and the characters they played ranged in age from late teens to early 40s. While I do not address the entirety of their work, I include fan favorites, cult classics, award-winning and breakthrough performances, and roles that were created especially for the actresses. The representations of mixed race that I analyze include those where characters were racially unmarked; coded as white; passing as white; or mixed, but race is incidental. Some roles also represent mixed race as tragic, deviant, and illicit. Other portrayals of mixed race attempt to construct that identity as ordinary, even post-racial, or with a colorblind lens, yet racial stereotypes persist. Finally, I analyze roles where mixed-race characters were in romantic relationships to reveal the limits on these relationships, especially when the mixed character's race is addressed.

I also examine the actresses' representations in broader media, including film reviews, interviews, TED talks, documentaries, and blog posts. Critical and audience reviews were helpful in understanding how mainstream and race-specific publications each respond to and interpret representations of mixed race. Mainstream film and television reviews that do not seriously examine the coding of mixed-race characters or do not mention race at all support the idea that the racial issues are incidental. On the other hand, film and television reviews by writers of color or published in black or non-mainstream media often critically discuss the problems with representations of mixed race. Unlike the mainstream media, these publications do not correlate

mixed race with being post-racial, but rather understand it as a form of racial passing and a sign of public discomfort with addressing race in the media.

Scholarly critiques of mixed-race representation in the early twenty-first century were crucial for situating my own work within that time frame and cultural and political climate in the United States. Ralina L. Joseph's book *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* draws from television, film, literature, and the election of Barack Obama as ways of understanding mixed-race representations in the twenty-first century.[11] Joseph critiques the push toward post-race and privileging of multiracial over black identity. *Crossing Black: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture* by Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins analyzes the current obsession with mixed-race (black and white) individuals using literature and cultural icons.[12] She critiques celebrations of mixed race and argues for acknowledging black identity with mixed race. *Mixed race Hollywood* by Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas presents essays on historical and current trends of mixed-race representation on screen.[13] Their text looks at performers of various racially mixed backgrounds. Several articles in film and media studies by Mary Beltrán also served as indispensable supporting literature for this project.[14] Ruth La Ferla's seminal *New York Times* article, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically

[11] Joseph, *Transcending Blackness*.

[12] Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, *Crossing Black: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

[13] Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, eds., *Mixed Race Hollywood*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

[14] Mary Beltrán, "Mixed Race in Latinowood: Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of Dark Angels," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 248–268; Mary Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama' Debate: Facing Off Over Millennial (Mixed-) Racial Impersonation," in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 191–209; Mary Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: When Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multi-Racial) Will Survive," *Cinema Journal* 44.2 (2005): 50–67; Mary Beltrán, "What's at Stake in Claims of Post-Racial Media," *FlowTV*, June 3, 2010, accessed August 30, 2016, http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/06/whats-at-stake-in-claims-of-post-racial-media/; Mary Beltrán, "Mixed Race in Hollywood Film and Media Culture," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 1–20.

Ambiguous," was essential for situating my work within the turn of the twenty-first century's fascination with the look of racially ambiguous individuals. Finally, articles on casting and the lack of diversity in Hollywood were used to support my discussion of the underrepresentation of black and mixed race on screen and why people of color in general are excluded from mainstream film roles.

Post-Racialism and Color-blind Racism in Popular Culture

The concepts of post-racialism and particularly color-blind racism as terms used in popular culture help frame and situate my arguments within the turn of the twenty-first-century's race relations.[15] Proponents of the idea that the civil rights movement succeeded—primarily neo-conservatives, but also some liberals—view the United States as being in the midst of a post-racial era.[16] Barack Obama's 2008 presidential victory was used as proof that racial inequality was now part of the past. Omi and Winant write that the election of a black or part-black president was "interpreted as resounding proof that the nation was moving 'beyond race'."[17] Those in the dominant racial group, and those who believed they would benefit from a post-racial society, supported the idea of a color-blind United States. In mainstream discourse, a widely held practice was to completely ignore race in order to appear non-racist.[18]

Currently, in the United States, race operates according to ideology of color-blind racism.[19] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva locates the emergence of color-blind racism in the late 1960s

[15] Some scholars and many journalists and writers use both post-race and post-racial.

[16] Howard Winant. *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001) 175.

[17] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

[18] Ibid., 2.

and uses it to describe "contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of non-racial dynamics."[20] The current and pervasive racial inequality in society is maintained by what Bonilla-Silva deems "new racism" which includes "practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial."[21] Where casting and on-screen performance are concerned, color-blind racism informs how mixed-race characters are constructed and understood. They are regularly coded as white. Race is erased from the narrative, and black ancestry is discounted. Despite including a mixed-race actress in a production, when black and mixed identity are ignored, whiteness is privileged, much like the way it is in society.

Color-blind racism maintains white privilege despite the fact that many whites do not view the refusal to take race into account as racist. Bonilla-Silva argues that color-blind racism exists in four frames, and that many whites use these frames to discuss their beliefs on race and race relations. The four frames include abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. The first and last frames are most relevant to my discussion of color-blind racism as it pertains to mixed-race performers. Abstract liberalism "involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., 'equal opportunity') . . . and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters."[22] This frame helps explicate the rationalization behind color-blind casting. It ignores the history of exclusion of minority races in Hollywood, as well as the current systems in place that bar non-white performers from gaining access to the same number of roles as whites. For instance, color-blind casting means roles are seemingly open to performers of any race. In theory, this could result in

---

[19] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. (5th ed). (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017) 15.

[20] Ibid., 19.

[21] Ibid., 20.

[22] Ibid., 71.

diverse casts.[23] However, color-blind casting also means that non-racially specific roles could be played by performers of any race. By not taking race into account, this superficially progressive move can result in reduced opportunities for performers of color. If the few ethnic and racially specific roles available opened up to all races, non-white actors could lose out on roles where their specific background was in demand. Excluding race in this way could take away gains non-white performers have made toward integrating Hollywood.

As a frame of color-blind racism, abstract liberalism helps explain how mixed-race actresses are believed to have personal choice in the roles they play. Bonilla-Silva argues that this frame views everyone as an "individual" with "choices;" it necessitates obscuring the history of segregation and its damaging outcome for racial minorities."[24] For instance, in Hollywood, the Motion Picture Production Code (1930–1968) barred miscegenation on screen.[25] Images of interracial sex, relationships, and mixed-race people were viewed as able to "lower the moral standards of viewers."[26] When mixed-race characters were featured, they were often tragic figures and played by white actresses. J. E. Smyth writes, "Race was therefore something to be performed through costume."[27] Filmmakers visually implied mixed ancestry, in which case "costume becomes the basic signifier of race."[28] Historically, roles for mixed-race actresses were scarce; they were not even cast as mixed-race protagonists. Post production code and into the present, constructions of mixed race on screen remain fraught, and roles are limited. Mixed-race

[23] For instance, the groundbreaking casting in Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy*. See Matthew Fogel. *Grey's Anatomy* Goes Colorblind." *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 8 May 2005. Web. 12 Sept. 2016.

[24] Ibid., 74.

[25] Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. 1930-1955. *A Code to Govern the Making of Motion Pictures the Reasons Supporting It and the Resolution for Uniform Interpretation. Margaret Herrick Digital Collections*. Website.

[26] *The Motion Picture Production Code*. Website. productioncode.dhwritings.com

[27] J.E. Smyth. "Classical Hollywood and the Filmic Writing of Interracial History, 1931-1939. *Mixed Race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. (New York: New York UP. 2008): 23-44. Print. 31.

[28] Ibid. 36.

actresses have few choices in terms of on-screen opportunities. Often, being cast in a big-budget Hollywood film means mixed-race actresses have their racial ancestry hidden or their identity coded as white.

Minimization of racism is a prevalent frame in the post-racial conception of the early twenty-first century. It asserts that race is not as significant as it used to be in overcoming obstacles. Bonilla-Silva states that this frame "suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances."[29] Under this frame, blatant racism is replaced by color-blind racism."[30] In Hollywood, non-white performers are no longer barred from lead roles; however, their characters often exist without a racial background. Mixed individuals on screen and in the public light are used to symbolize the lessening significance of distinct racial categories. Black ancestry is downplayed in favor of multiracial or ambiguous identities. Joseph argues deeming mixed race exceptional is "a type of color-blind racism where multiraciality is used to mean 'no race'."[31] Under a color-blind lens, the ethnic and cultural backgrounds and histories of people of color are negated. Though not as overt as pre-Civil Rights era racism, erasing race and experiences related to race that differ from the dominant racial group functions as racism.[32]

A color-blind approach to race primarily benefits whites and perpetuates racial inequality and racism.[33] Film scholar Nancy Wang Yuen writes, "Hollywood maintains racial status quo

---

[29] Bonilla-Silva, 75.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Joseph, 25.

[32] Monnica Williams. "Colorblind Ideology is a Form of Racism." *Psychology Today*. December 27, 2011. Accessed July 6, 2016. https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism.

through colorblind racism, or the attribution of white dominance to individual merit and cultural explanations while denying institutional discrimination."[34] The media promotes Hollywood as neutral in its casting, thus Hollywood continues to exclude.[35] Racism in Hollywood that denies the impact of race on actors and viewers of color, mirrors the sentiment of the dominant society. Yuen writes, "more than 80 percent of white Americans deny the role of race in job, income, and housing discrepancies between whites and blacks."[36] Omi and Winant contend, "Race has been a profound determinant of one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and indeed one's sense of identity."[37] Ignoring the way race shapes opportunities in life marginalizes anyone outside of the dominant race and perpetuates racism.

Lessening the importance of race to appear non-racist harms non-whites despite attempts to correct for past racism. Sylvia Chong's analysis of "color-blind logic" contends, "This compulsion towards racelessness reproduces the valorization of whiteness, reifying one particular racial identity into a template for universalism."[38] Since whites are not regularly identified by, nor burdened by race, they *choose* whether or not to ethnically identify. For those physically marked by race; their identity *is* partially shaped by their race. Detaching from racial identity means doing what whites do but without the privileges inherent in whiteness.

Counterarguments to mainstream media and Hollywood's perpetuating of a color-blind way of dealing with race span various fields of study. In addition to race scholars such as Bonilla-Silva and Omi and Winant, clinical psychologist Monnica Williams, and Adia Harvey

---

[33] See Bonilla-Silva 34. See also Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 42.

[34] Ibid., 42.

[35] Ibid., 43.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Omi and Winant 8.

[38] Sylvia Chong, "'Look an Asian!' The Politics of Racial Interpellation in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11, no.1 (February 2008): 33, quoted in Joseph, 166.

Wingfield, a writer for *The Atlantic,* view colorblindness as replicating racial inequality.[39] Williams argues, "color-blindness alone is not sufficient to heal racial wounds on a national or personal level. It is only a half-measure that in the end operates as a form of racism."[40] The separation of the races that persists despite a colorblind outlook on race means that whites continue to lack interaction with non-whites in daily life. Bonilla-Silva asserts, "In all areas of social life blacks and whites remain mostly separate and disturbingly unequal" and there has been "startlingly little progress since the 1960s."[41] While on-screen representation cannot take the place of human interaction, when segregation and racism are a normalized part of daily life, viewing realistic and complex depictions of other races on screen can help break down racial stereotypes and present a more realistic view of society.

Presently, as a post-racial approach to race, multi-raciality is often viewed as progress despite the way it can sanction white hierarchy and deny the significance of black ancestry. In their study of mothers' responses to Obama's first election, Dariotis and Yoo found that mothers across races viewed the new President's mixed race as able to transform race relations and repair social fractures."[42] Obama was believed to be a bridge builder.[43] The belief that by virtue of his dual racial backgrounds he could end racism caused mothers in the dominant racial group and African American and mixed-race mothers to subscribe to the trope of mixed-race individuals as inherently able to unify divided groups. Other Obama supporters viewed him as "a healing

[39] See Monnica Williams. See also Adia Harvey Wingfield, "Color-blindness is Counterproductive," *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2015 accessed Sept 7, 2016.

[40] M. Williams.

[41] Bonilla-Silva 40.

[42] Wei Ming Dariotis and Grace J. Yoo, "Obama Mamas and Mixed Race: Hoping for a More Perfect Union," in *Obama and the Biracial Factor: The Battle for a New American Majority*, ed. Andrew Jolivette. (The Policy Press: University of Bristol, 2012), 106.

[43] Ibid., 109.

facilitator of an imagined racial utopia, even an embodiment of that utopia."[44] The multiracial utopia is a futuristic place where as everyone is racially mixed and there is no minority or majority—thus race no longer matters.[45] However, those who deem the United States post-racial buy into a form of racism that denies current inequality and only serves white Americans. The post-racial goal fails people of color, including those of mixed race, as hierarchies that privilege whiteness or similarities to whiteness, such as colorism, remain in place. The current United States is neither post-racial nor post-racist.

Superficially, the twenty-first-century United States appears more multiracial due in part to the prevalence of mixed-race stories in popular culture. Joseph writes, public celebrations of mixed-race identity include "the memoirs of celebrity children to the reality shows of supermodels to the speeches of presidential candidates."[46] These articulations of multiracial identity regularly ignore continuing social inequities rooted in racial difference. *Some* racial progress is misconstrued as inevitably leading to a post-racial society. However, even those of mixed ancestry are subject to skin color hierarchies that reproduce unequal treatment based on race.

For mixed-race and non-whites individuals, bodily markers such as skin color are used to read and categorize race. Omi and Winant argue, "there is a crucial corporeal dimension to the race-concept. Race is ocular in an irreducible way. Human bodies are visually read, understood,

---

[44] Joseph, *Transcending Blackness*, 2.

[45] See Lisa Funderburg, "The Changing Faces of America," *National Geographic*, October 2013, accessed April 24, 2015, http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/10/changing-faces/funderburg-text. Despite more mixing occurring, Funderburg argues that race still matters and racial disparities persist. See also, Amanda Froelich, "This is What Americans Will Look Like By 2050 – and it's Stunning," *The Mind Unleashed*, April 21, 2014, accessed April 24, 2015, http://themindunleashed.com/2014/04/americans-will-look-like-2050-stunning.html. For a counter argument, see Kristina Wong, "Unpopular Opinion: 6 Reasons Why Your Utopic Vision for a Mixed-Race Future is My Nightmare," *XOJane*, December 10, 2014, accessed December 15, 2014, http://www.xojane.com/issues/your-mixed-race-utopia-is-my-nightmare.

[46] Joseph *Transcending Blackness*. 1.

and narrated by means of symbolic meanings and associations."[47] Mixed-race people in particular are subject to having their physical traits scrutinized as a way of making sense of their unconventional backgrounds. In Hollywood, due to the colorblind manner of dealing with racial difference, many mixed-race actresses play characters whose race is coded in order to detract from their physical markers of blackness. Omi and Winant write, "the denial of the corporeal and 'ocular' dimensions of raciality–have become the principal intellectual apparatus of the neoconservative and now 'colorblind' racial project."[48] Hollywood has the ability to promote standards of beauty. More opportunities are available to mixed-race performers whose bodies and skin can be stripped of racial markers or who can be coded as raceless. The erasure of race on and off screen denies representation to those whose skin color is the antithesis of white Western beauty ideals.

Since race is a visible physical feature,[49] skin color can be ranked and used to create and maintain hierarchies. Bonilla-Silva writes that among the black population in the United States, colorism is a way to socially classify one another.[50] Evelyn Nakano Glenn defines colorism as "social hierarchy based on gradations of skin tone within and between racial and ethnic groups. Light skin acts as a form of symbolic capital, one that is especially crucial for women because of the connection between skin tone and attractiveness and desirability."[51] Besides dividing blacks, colorism favors those of mixed race, since they are likely to have lighter skin. Historically, in the

[47] Omi and Winant, 13.

[48] Ibid., 39.

[49] See Omi and Winant, 40, 246.

[50] Bonilla-Silva 219.

[51] Evelyn Nakano Glenn. "Yearning for Lightness: Transnational Circuits in the Marketing and Consumption of Skin Lighteners." *Gender & Society*, 22, no. 2 (2008) 281-302.

United States mulattos were treated better and thought to be inherently smarter than "pure" or "dark-skinned Africans."[52]

Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, African Americans have been a primary demographic for the marketing of skin-lightening products.[53] Having skin color match the shades of mixed-race performers is a goal for users of skin-lightening creams. Glenn writes that on Internet forums, African Americans express the desire to have light skin as opposed to white skin: "Discussions of skin lightening on African American Internet forums indicate that the participants seek not white skin but 'light' skin like that of African American celebrities such as film actress Halle Berry and singer Beyoncé Knowles."[54] Furthermore, Glenn argues, in the selling of skin lightening products, "dark skin is associated with pain, rejection and limited options."[55]

Colorism is promoted and reinforced when black women are valued for having skin color that has similarities to whites. When performers with black ancestry gain lead roles that require being detached from black identity, their light skin is what helps them present a more racially ambiguous appearance and fit better with a white cast. This valuing of light over dark skin in all aspects of visual media reinforces color and racial hierarchies; light skin becomes the beauty standard and the informer of self-worth. In effect, skin color hierarchies not only divide those of black ancestry, they perpetuate the use of toxic skin bleaching creams that punish black women for their non-conforming bodies.

---

[52] Glenn 286-287.

[53] Ibid., 287-288.

[54] Ibid., 288.

[55] Ibid., 298.

Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, Maya Rudolph

My project focuses on Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, and Maya Rudolph due to their shared racial ancestry, similar gender and age (early 40s), parallel rise to celebrity during the "post-racial era," and because their mixed race has informed their on-screen roles.[56] I deconstruct their performances to counter a common narrative of mixed race standing for the lessening significance of race. One of my goals for analyzing the roles they play is to show that despite the growing inclusion of mixed-race actresses in television and film, color-blind racism is prevalent. Even when playing mixed race or non-white, Jones', Newton's, and Rudolph's characters rarely have full and contextualized racial identities. They are often comprised of stereotypes. Featuring mixed-race actresses in lead roles despite their history of marginalization from the screen does not always make the production more racially diverse if the characters are coded as white. On the contrary, often these roles reveal persistent unease with mixed race or the desire to erase racial significance.

Jones, Newton, and Rudolph are known for their racially mixed backgrounds and for portraying mixed characters; they each have part-black and part-white ancestry, with one parent being primarily African or African American and the other being of European ancestry and considered white. Each has been cast in racially specific roles and played mixed-race as well as racially ambiguous and racially unmarked characters. As celebrities, especially during the first decade of the 2000s, their fluid and multifaceted identities were the subject of media fascination. While all three have claimed a mixed identity, they also highlight other aspects of their backgrounds. For instance, Newton, who spent the majority of her life in her native England, identifies by nationality; Jones is a practitioner of the Jewish faith and embraces the cultural and

[56] I use racial ancestry to stand in for being of African descent. Though all three have African ancestry, only Newton identifies as Zimbabwean. Many African Americans do not know their ethnic ancestry or African country of origin.

familial parts of the religion; Rudolph did not always define herself racially. Their fluidity also means they have asserted different identities as their careers have progressed.

An analysis of their early film and television roles reveals that Jones, Newton, and Rudolph initially played mixed-race characters whose backgrounds were similar to their own.[57] Their rise from supporting to lead roles, and from lower budget to Blockbuster Hollywood films coincided with the arrival of "Generation Mix,"[58] a term Media Studies scholars Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas use to refer to "U.S. film, television, and popular culture since the mid-1990s."[59] Fojas writes, "the ethnically ambiguous multiracial actor, model, or public figure is a desirable commodity in U.S. popular culture."[60] I use both the term and era to historically situate my project. The turn-of-the-twenty-first-century celebrations of mixed race and presumed post-race meant that racial categorizations were no longer supposed to hold tangible meanings. Depicting mixed and ambiguous characters not tied to any particular race reaffirmed that race was losing importance. Since Jones, Newton, and Rudolph represented various races and could therefore play characters detached from specific racial identity and be coded as "ethnically neutral, diverse or ambiguous," they had "tremendous appeal."[61] As their careers advanced, they were cast across races: Jones and Rudolph were frequently coded as white, while Newton was

[57] For instance, Jones as mixed-race Louisa Fenn in *Boston Public* (2000–2004), Rudolph as Rita in *Idiocracy* (2006), Newton as Thandiwe Adjewa in *Flirting* (1991).

[58] "Generation Mix" is a term created by the mixed race advocacy and awareness organization the MAVIN foundation and used by Beltrán and Fojas collectively and Fojas individually to articulate the 1990s-present-day period of multiracial celebrations and racial diversity.

[59] Beltrán and Fojas, *Mixed Race*, 1.

[60] Camilla Fojas, "The Biracial Baby Boom and the Multiracial Millennium," in *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art*, eds. Laura Kina and Wei Ming Dariotis (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 228.

[61] Qtd. in Ruth La Ferla, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," *New York Times*, December 28, 2003, accessed October 25, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/28/style/generation-ea-ethnically-ambiguous.html. Ron Berger was the chief executive of the advertising agency and trend research company Euro RSCG MVBMS Partners in New York. His statements on the desire for and celebration of ethnically ambiguous models that appeared in La Ferla's *New York Times* article have appeared in numerous academic publications on race, sexuality, colorblindness, fashion, and television.

often coded as black.[62] Of the three, Rudolph appears to cross races with the most ease and to play mixed-race characters that have the most full and complex identities.

Despite identifying as mixed race and being known as mixed or black actresses at some point in their careers, Jones and Rudolph have played characters that are not identifiable by any racial, ethnic, or cultural traits, leaving them racially unmarked or coded white. Reading characters as white can happen when they are not intrinsically tied to or marked with a specific racial identification that deviates from what is considered the norm. A character can be read as white despite being played by a mixed performer. I rely on the following scholars' articulations of whiteness as the norm, where white identity means being unmarked and unaffected by race. Nishime argues, "if one has no race, one is white in America's racial logic."[63] Mia McKenzie writes, "Whiteness chooses you . . . it gives you–whether you want or acknowledge them or not–a whole slew of privileges that non-white folks don't get."[64] Herman S. Gray contends that as recently as the latter half of the twentieth century, non-white portrayals on screen were "threatening and disruptive," jeopardizing "the logic of a universal, normative, invisible whiteness on which the national imaginary . . . depended."[65] Deviations from whiteness are "irrefutable evidence of difference."[66] In essence, whiteness provides invisibility, making those who are racially marked vulnerable. Coding mixed-race characters as white separates them from their black identity. The color-blind racism that reaffirms white privilege on screen mirrors racial hierarchies off screen.

---

[62] Newton was regularly coded as black, an exception was her role in *The Truth about Charlie* (2002).

[63] Nishime, 277.

[64] Mia McKenzie, *Black Girl Dangerous: On Race, Queerness, Class and Gender* (Oakland, CA: BGD Press, 2014), 70.

[65] Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 101.

[66] Nishime, 276.

Mixed individuals are visually categorized by the way their races are read by others. Race can mark their bodies or leave no recognizable markers. Race can also be performed through purposeful visual clues. Thus, racially mixed actors can take on white roles where they downplay cultural signifiers of black identity. The way mixed performers *look* can determine how much leeway they are granted in acting across races. As part of an all or primarily white cast, visual proximity to others can help them fit in.[67]

Racial performance as white or raceless can take the form of racial passing. Beltrán and Fojas define "passing" as it pertains to those of mixed race as "signifying an act of pretending to be of only European American ancestry when in fact of partial African or other nonwhite descent."[68] They argue that mixed-race individuals with racially ambiguous features might attempt passing to attain greater opportunities in education, employment, and housing.[69]

Racial passing reveals the instability of race. Visible signs of race can be adjusted or read in different contexts. When mixed-race performers are cast as white or raceless, black traits are hidden, and signifiers of whiteness are emphasized; characters become part of a racial group that may not initially be visually apparent. They pass as white when performing racially unmarked roles.

Bodies of non-whites are visually read and categorized by perceived race in all social interactions, as well as on screen. Omi and Winant's theory of *racial formation* is helpful for understanding why we categorize and how we make sense of physical representations of race. Part historical and part social, *racial formation* is a "process by which racial categories are

[67] See Nishime 278.

[68] Beltrán and Fojas 3.

[69] Ibid.

created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[70] Racial formation is informed by what is visible to others. "There is a crucial and non-reducible *visual dimension* to the definition and understanding of racial categories. Bodies are visually read and narrated in ways that draw upon an ensemble of symbolic meanings and associations."[71] Racial formation can be used to understand why racial coding or unmarking of mixed race is crucial to making sense of film and television characters, and the racial politics of the production. Race has overwhelming "ocular" and "corporeal" components."[72] If an ethnic and cultural background is not included as part of a character's identity, viewers may consciously or unconsciously use racial signifiers to make sense of the character. They will search for race when it is obscured or unavailable.

Present day post-racial discourse grew out of changing thoughts about race and race relations in the early 1970s, particularly in the Southern United States. It was reported that "70 politicians and professors… believe their region of 60 million citizens has entered an era in which race relations are soon to be replaced as a major concern by population increase, industrial development and economic fluctuations."[73] Race was said to be less significant than in the past and less pressing than other social issues.

Today, despite being deemed to hold less importance, race continues to influence U.S. society and social structure.[74] For non-whites, race is not part of the past but continues to shape lives in ways that oppress and subordinate. Race is unstable and always in flux, evidenced by its ever-changing definitions in U.S. law and society. Race continues to be, as Omi and Winant

[70] Omi and Winant. 109.

[71] Ibid., 111

[72] Ibid., 13.

[73] James T. Wooten, "Compact Set Up for 'Post-Racial' South," *New York Times*, October 5, 1971, accessed Sept 1, 2016.

[74] See Emanuel Lusca, "Race as a Social Construct," *Anthropology.net*, October 1, 2008, accessed November 12, 2015.

contend, a "master category of social organization in the United States."[75] Lusca emphasizes, "race indicates differences in status."[76] While the dominant group may claim to no longer see race, for many non-whites it is visible and limiting.[77] Those who wear race on their skin know that designating an era as "post-racial" does not mean racial distinctions cease to matter.

Social and cultural events signifying racial progress led to the claim that the United States was moving into a post-racial era. Interracial relationships in the post-*Loving* era resulted in a new generation of people whose appearance did not fit a distinct or singular race. In the 1990s, ethnic ambiguity was trendy in fashion and media. Generation E.A. (Ethnically Ambiguous) emerged alongside the fight for legal recognition of multiracial people that was finally granted with the 2000 Census. Barack Obama's first term in office and the opening decade of the twenty-first century stood for the presumed end of racism.[78]

The turn of the twenty-first century is marked with being the era "after the importance of race,"[79] and after the existence of racism and questions of power are ignored."[80] Obama's Presidential win was for many, the surpassing of impermeable racial barriers. Discussing the possibility of and problems with a post-race America, David A. Hollinger writes, "that historic event of the election of a black president of the United States – made it easier to contemplate a 'possible future' that might be called 'post-ethnic' or 'post-racial.'"[81] Martin, Jr. writes that

---

[75] Omi and Winant, 108.

[76] Lusca.

[77] See Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *The National Seed Project*, 2003, accessed April 28, 2015. When the social construction of race is beneficial, it is sometimes invisible.

[78] See Joseph, 166. "Post-race is an ideology that the media applied to Obama's voters and his voters' approach to him, it is also something his campaign applied to Obama, billing him at times as the so-called post-racial candidate."

[79] Joseph, "Tyra Banks is Fat," 239.

[80] Joseph, *Transcending Blackness,* 166.

[81] David A. Hollinger, "The Concept of Post-Racial: How its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions," *Daedalus* 140, no. 1 (2011): 174–182.

Obama's election showed racial progress on a national scale despite it being a signifier of neither post-race, nor the end of racial inequality.[82] The media infused Obama's victory with the assertion that racism was ending. Those not regularly impacted by race could subscribe to post-race promises, or the "national catharsis" that Obama's terms in office were projected to bring.[83] However, for many people of color, racism, income and wealth disparities, mass incarceration, and segregation continue. If America was now post-racism, racial inequality would not structure even the mundane parts of everyday life of people of color.[84] Further, with the election of Obama's predecessor, Donald Trump, racism has once again become overt and sanctioned.[85]

Ethnically Ambiguous and Racially Unspecified Casting

Film and television casting can reveal racial trends or disrupt the norm and set new standards such as the demand for ethnic/racially ambiguous performers, or casting across races regardless of role. Rastogi writes, "in a breakdown, the filmmakers' and producers' initial wishes for the role are on display—and put into words."[86] These documents are useful in examining "the state of on-screen diversity" and to question "the way writers, casting directors, agents, and actors think about race."[87] Casting notices reveal more roles written as open to any race; on the surface this shows a trend toward greater casting diversity. However, many roles publicized to

[82] Martin, Jr., 72–73.

[83] Adam Nagourney, "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls," *The New York Times,* November 4, 2008, accessed January 28, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/us/politics/05elect.html.

[84] See Bonilla-Silva, 220–222. "Discrimination affects almost every aspect of the lives of people of color…in hospitals, restaurants, trying to buy cars or hail a cab, driving, flying . . . living while black [or brown] is quite hard and affects the health (physical and mental) of people of color tremendously."

[85] Ibid., 254.

[86] Nina Shen Rastogi, "Please Submit All Ethnicities: The Tricky Business of Writing Casting Notices," *Slate*, July 30, 2012, accessed November 15, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/07/casting_and_race_the_tricky_business_of_writing_casting_notices.html.

[87] Ibid.

non-whites are for background parts or extras, thus revealing only minor inclusiveness.[88] Even when characters do not need to be racially specific, seemingly progressive open casting calls do not mean rosters are always filled with racially diverse actors.

Color-blind casting can diversify and disrupt racially exclusive casting when all character descriptions are racially neutral and casting is open to all races. Shonda Rhimes, for instance, "the most powerful African-American female show runner in television" writes roles unattached to race, and actors of any race can fill any role.[89] Matthew Fogel writes that Rhimes' 2005 pilot for *Grey's Anatomy* did not include ethnic backgrounds[90] for any characters; "her casting process was wide open."[91] Fogel describes Rhimes as "almost defiantly fresh for network television."[92] Since 2005, Rhimes has had four primetime network television shows. Three of them, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal,* and *How to Get Away With Murder* previously aired in succession on *ABC* on Thursday nights.[93] David Hinckley deems Rhimes, and her production company Shondaland "the biggest brand name in network television production today."[94] All Shondaland series have non-white, and primarily African Americans in featured roles. *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with*

[88] Ibid. For example, Rastogi refers to a casting notice in May of 2012, for "hipster types" of "all ethnicities" to play background roles that was met with a mix of cautious optimism (at least they're trying) and eye-rolls (only extras?); a 2011 casting notice for the *HBO* series *Girls* for a female junkie, for which agents were asked to "PLEASE SUBMIT ALL ETHNICITIES"; and "notices for M. Night Shyamalan's *The Last Airbender* specified that its four leads could be 'Caucasian or any other ethnicity,' critics noted that the phrasing—intentional or not—made the casting process sound a bit like . . . some . . . are more equal than others."

[89] Willa Paskin, "Network TV is Broken. So How Does Shonda Rhimes Keep Making Hits?" *The New York Times Magazine*, May 9, 2013, accessed September 12, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/magazine/shonda-rhimes.html.

[90] In casting and media, the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably. Both mean non-normative white.

[91] Fogel.

[92] Ibid.

[93] *Grey's Anatomy*, created by Shonda Rhimes (2005; Shondaland, Buena Vista Home Entertainment), television; *Scandal*, created by Shonda Rhimes (2012; ABC Studios, Shondaland), television; *How to Get Away With Murder*, created by Peter Nowalk (2014; Shondaland), television; *Private Practice*, created by Shonda Rhimes (2007; Shondaland), television. *Private Practice* was a spin-off of *Grey's Anatomy*. It aired for five seasons.

[94] David Hinckley, "Shonda Rhimes Takes Over Thursdays on ABC with the Return of Grey's Anatomy, Scandal, How to Get Away With Murder," New *York Daily News*, January 25, 2015, accessed September 12, 2016.

Murder have African American female leads. When viewers attempt to attribute race to Rhimes' characters, her response is that the actors were not cast as the race of the characters.[95] Yet, race is not irrelevant, but can be written in as part of a character's identity. Once cast, Rhimes' non-white characters have full identities, racial issues can factor in as one of many complexities.

Casting requests seeking ambiguous-looking performers are not often racially specific, and are often for characters that will be detached from race. Such requests seek a blended look that can be highly subjective, derived from stereotypes, and still give preference to or exclude certain races. Twenty-first century requests reflect the popularity of mixed, ambiguous-looking celebrities. Simi Horowitz of *Backstage*[96] writes, "the high visibility of cultural icons such as baseball player Derek Jeter, singer Mariah Carey, and action hero Vin Diesel" was reflected in casting requests for "actors who are 'ethnically ambiguous,' of 'mixed ethnicity," or have a 'global look,' especially for commercials, films, and television shows."[97] Mixed actors responded to these notices in various ways; some capitalized on their ambiguity, while others altered features (e.g., hair texture), and some saw their options limited because they did not appear ambiguous enough to meet the current demand.[98]

Since stereotypes inform expectations for certain "ethnic" or mixed looks, failing to appear like the stereotype could mean losing out on a role. Armenian-Egyptian American actress, Nora Armani was denied a job because while she had the desired background, she did not have the stereotypical look the director expected.[99] Armani stated, "A movie writer-director who

---

[95] Ibid. Rhimes stated, "My Dad called and said, 'I thought it was really interesting how all the black doctors came out to support the black scrub nurse. . . .' I had to tell him that the character was originally Asian."

[96] *Backstage* website markets itself as the "largest online casting platform in the United States."

[97] Simi Horowitz, "Ethnic Ambiguity: More Roles, but Still a Mixed Bag," *Backstage*, July14, 2004, accessed December 17, 2015, https://www.backstage.com/news/ethnic-ambiguity-more-roles-but-still-a-mixed-bag/.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

wrote a character in a script based on me would not cast me in the role . . . he said, 'You are not ethnic looking enough.' He wanted a more stereotypic Armenian look than I have."[100] According to Josh Levin-Soler, the trend toward "ethnically ambiguous casting . . . has been more limiting" since his particular ethnic blend is not in demand.[101] The desire for an ambiguous look can bar opportunities even for those with mixed and difficult-to-discern appearances.

Despite the emergence of more opportunities for non-white performers to gain varied roles, casting notices and productions continue to privilege white and exclude black actors in lead roles. Though casting notices have changed their language, the increase in jobs for actors whose appearance deviates from standard white does not mean white actors are losing out on work or lead roles. While racially and ethnically blind casting notices can be more inclusive, they can also deny roles to non-whites because the parts are not created with specific races in mind, in which case there may be no need to hire minority performers. Rastogi explains, "no ethnic designation is implicitly understood by agents and actors to be Caucasian."[102] Further, the desire for an ambiguous look can eliminate non-white actors who do not appear mixed. For black actors in particular, there has been continual difficulty being cast in roles that are not "black-explicit."[103] Since they do not fit the usual parameters of ambiguousness, they lose out on non-racially specific roles while whites and now those mixed with white continue to be synonymous with universal characters.

---

[100] Ibid., quoted in Horowitz.

[101] Ibid., quoted in Horowitz. Levin-Soler describes himself as, "part Caucasian Jew, part Hispanic . . . European features, but I'm olive-skinned with dark hair. I'm not exactly Latino looking, but I'm certainly not all-American looking either."

[102] Rastogi.

[103] Cristina Lule, "86 Years a Snub-The Struggle for Black Actors in Hollywood," *Awards Circuit*, March 12, 2014, accessed January 17, 2016, http://www.awardscircuit.com/2014/03/12/86-years-snub-struggle-black-actors-hollywood/. Lule uses this term to designate roles that are "not race neutral and are unfit for an actress of any other race to take."

Non-racially specific casting did not radically shift the racial composition of characters on screen; however mandates to include non-white actors were put in place and some responses to the requirements for more diverse casting revealed latent racism within Hollywood. In the fall of 2015, primetime television saw major changes in casting following new agreements that 50% of roles for TV pilots must be ethnic. It was a combined industry endeavor that included revising some roles so they could be cast with actors of color. This new mandate was due to the 2014–2015 season where several new shows, *Black-ish*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and *Jane the Virgin,* among others, succeeded with racially diverse casts or lead actors of color. Further, UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African-American Studies released "The 2014 Hollywood Diversity Report: Making Sense of the Disconnect," stating, "movies with relatively diverse casts generate above average performance at the box office and that TV shows reflecting U.S. diversity excel in ratings."[104] Financial rewards incentivized Hollywood to increase on-screen diversity. One agent commented, "I feel that the tide has turned . . . I can pitch any actor for any role, and I think that's good."[105] Nellie Andreeva, co-editor in chief of Hollywood's *Deadline,* called the new pilots a "noticeable shift toward minority castings" and a "concerted effort" to make change on broadcast television.[106] She then caused media uproar by asking if increased diversity was too extreme. Andreeva argued, "Instead of opening the field for actors of any race to compete for any role in a color-blind manner, there has been a significant number of parts

[104] Dave McNary, "Show Business Diversity Trailing U.S. Demographics, UCLA Report Shows," *Variety,* February 12, 2014, accessed March 1, 2017, http://variety.com/2014/film/news/show-business-diversity-trailing-u-s-demographics-ucla-report-shows-1201098838/.

[105] Nellie Andreeva, "Pilots 2015: The Year of Ethnic Casting," *Deadline*, March 24, 2015, accessed December 16, 2015, http://deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511/.

[106] Ibid.

designated as ethnic . . . making them off-limits for Caucasian actors."[107] Instead of viewing diversity as further including those who have been consistently marginalized on screen, Andreeva's definition of colorblind casting would keep Hollywood racially exclusive. Without opening roles to actors of color, not seeing race could keep television primarily white.[108]

Despite the increase in race-neutral casting, non-mixed black performers do not necessarily gain more opportunities, nor can they escape historical typecasts. Currently, only a handful of shows feature black and mixed actresses in lead roles as black and mixed characters.[109] Non-racially specific or ambiguous roles as well as most lead film roles remain out of reach for black actresses because they are overlooked when performances do not deal specifically with race. Historically, black actresses have been cast in and succeed in Oscar-worthy roles as black characters that, as Lule states, have "material, subservient characteristics" or "are not race neutral and are unfit for an actress of any other race to take."[110] The success of these roles and refusal to view black actresses apart from race means that they continually play stereotypical or historical characters, and those types of roles keep being rewritten.[111] Those actresses who are considered for more complex roles, the kind that could be played by

---

[107] Ibid. Andreeva conflates "ethnic" and "ethnicity" with "race" in her discussion of black actors representing "ethnic diversity."

[108] See Peter Bart and Mike Fleming Jr. "Bart & Fleming: A Mea Culpa; Frank Sinatra Re-Cast; Tent Pole Assembly Line." *Deadline*. Website. 29 Mar. 2015. Web. 13 Sept. 2016. *Deadline* apologized. Co-editor-in-chief, Mike Fleming Jr. stated Andreeva's article was meant to express the rise in people of color cast in TV pilots to the point where whites had fewer jobs than before. See "Civil Rights Organization Responds to Deadline Hollywood's Apology for Ethnic Castings Article," *Color of Change*, Mar 25, 2015, accessed September 13, 2016. In their apology, they ignored the fundamental controversy; "opening the doors of opportunity for marginalized communities will somehow hurt white people." See also Joshua Alston, "*Deadline* is Super Sorry about that 'Plague of Ethnic Actors' Story," *A.V. Club*, March 30, 2015, accessed January 12, 2016. Many readers saw the apology as "normaliz[ing] deeply entrenched discriminatory attitudes against performers of color."

[109] For example, *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Black-ish* featuring mixed-race Tracee Ellis Ross, and *Empire*, to name a few.

[110] Lule, "86 Years a Snub." Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer, and Taraji P. Henson were all nominated for Academy Awards "for their portrayals of domestic housemaids." Other examples include Lupita Nyong'o playing a slave, Gaborey Sidibe in *Precious*, or Jennifer Hudson or Diana Ross playing African American musicians.

[111] Ibid.

performers of any race, are often mixed and appear ambiguous (e.g., Jones, Newton, and Rudolph). When mixed actresses are preferred over single-race black actresses, mixed performers benefit from increased diversity in casting to the detriment of non-mixed black actresses.

The Need for Positive and Diverse Mixed and Black Characters

Featuring people of color in multi-dimensional roles that resist stereotypes teaches viewers about their self-worth and educates white viewers about people of other backgrounds. Off screen, racism and oppression of people of color persists. On-screen, images of mixed and black characters have been historically damaging and these tropes endure. While some of the most blatant forms of racial mockery have been eliminated, many characters remain shaped by tragedy or hyper-sexuality.[112] These flat and stereotyped characters lack complexity and full humanity. In "Portrayal of Minorities in the Film, Media, and Entertainment Industries," Horton, Price, and Brown argue, "the media sets the tone for the morals, values, and images of our culture."[113] For over a century, movies "have had more of an impact on the public mind than any other entertainment medium."[114] Lack of positive and realistic representations have real-life consequences. Horton et al., write that the unequal status of blacks is often mirrored, "and enhanced by the negative portrayals of blacks in the media."[115] Bonilla-Silva holds news media responsible for enabling racial stereotypes and color-blind racism. News stories about people of

[112] See Mel Watkins, "What Was a Blackface Minstrel Show?" *PBS*, 1999–2000, accessed Jan 12, 2016. Blackface and minstrelsy portrayed blacks as "being stupid, as being comical, as being basically a frivolous character." Society welcomed these images because they reinforced their own stereotypes about black people.

[113] Yuri Horton, Raagen Price, and Eric Brown, "Portrayal of Minorities in the Film, Media, and Entertainment Industries," *Poverty & Prejudice: Media and Race*, *Edge*, July 1, 1999, accessed December 14, 2015, https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/portrayal.htm.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid.

color are often racially biased and, if seen enough times, cause white audiences with no other connection to non-whites have their racial views corroborated.[116] In effect, the segregation that continues to structure society makes close connections between blacks and whites rare.[117] Hence, whites who have a lack empathy for blacks and can have difficulty separating reality from the media's constructed images.[118]

Due to the power the media has in attributing value and affirming (or denying) the humanity of disparate groups of people, absence from the screen is detrimental. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," bell hooks writes, "mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy. To stare at the television, or mainstream movies, to engage its images, was to engage its negation of black representation"[119] Absence also occurs when there is only a singular and static story about a group of people told by a more powerful group. In "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warned, "power is . . . not just the ability to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story of that person."[120] She stated, "A single story makes recognition of our shared humanity difficult."[121] Depending how they are presented, stories have the ability to "dispossess" and "malign" and "break dignity" and further oppress minority groups.[122] However, if inclusive of multiple perspectives and a full range of characteristics, stories "can also be used

[116] Bonilla-Silva, 135.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

[119] bell hooks. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (New York: Routledge, 2015): 117.

[120] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story" (TED Talk, Oxford, England, July 2009).

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

to empower and humanize."[123] If representations are few, it is critical that they resist typecasts and appear multidimensional.

Historically, the construction of black and part black characters helped maintain white over black hierarchy; today, despite attempts at being more racially progressive, some black and mixed characters lack what Adichie describes as "the full range of humanity that is available to their white counterparts."[124] Emphasis on physical differences and inferior class status is common, even in current productions that appear racially inclusive or are written as post-race.[125] Moreover, it is hard to overcome the past when those minorities who gain media fame then turn around and reinforce racial stereotypes—often while providing comedy. Gene Demby writes of the new wave of accidental African American Internet celebrities inspiring memes, GIFs, and talk show interviews: "race and class seemed to be central to the celebrity. . . . They were poor. They were black. . . . And they were unashamed. That's still weird and chuckle-worthy."[126] These "famous" blacks are little more than caricatures. Since diverse images of blacks are rare, for many whites, exposure occurs when blacks "make one of their infrequent forays into our national consciousness."[127] This is regularly in the form of the media's constructed images of their degradation.[128]

---

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Films and television shows analyzed below such as *The Office*, *Flirting,* and *Away We Go* emphasize physical differences in skin color and/or body type. *I Love You, Man* and *Idiocracy* emphasize class disparities.

[126] Gene Demby, "Are We Laughing With Charles Ramsey?" *Code Switch*, May 7, 2013, accessed December 14, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/05/07/181982154/are-we-laughing-with-charles-ramsey.

[127] Ibid.

[128] See Marcella Gadson, "#MediaImagesMatter: The Cause and Effect of Media Stereotypes on People of Color," *Broadband & Social Justice*, February 27, 2015, accessed December 29, 2015, http://broadbandandsocialjustice.org/2015/02/mediaimagesmatter-the-cause-and-effect-of-media-stereotypes-on-people-of-color. Gadson provides background and commentary on Multicultural Media, Television and Internet Council's Broadband & Social Justice Summit, "#MediaImagesMatter: The Combined Effects of Traditional and

On screen, women of color are often trapped in recycled tropes that depict them as overly sexual while also reinforcing their inferior race and gender. Fraught representations or lack of presence on screen reiterate that their stories lack importance.[129] Marketing and audience attendance has been blamed for keeping non-white actresses from obtaining more roles. Imran Siddiquee argues there is "overwhelming evidence that Hollywood has frustratingly chosen not to represent a huge portion of its audience in the movies it puts the most money behind."[130] The Representation Project reviewed the top 500 films of all-time (films that play to a global audience and have ability to greatly influence) and found that only six out of 500 had a woman of color in a lead role.[131] Further, five of the six are animated.[132] Amirah Mercer deemed this "a startling stat that poses serious implications regarding how people of color and women are valued in society."[133] Siddiquee concurred and emphasized the importance of visibility for underrepresented groups:

> . . . as a complete record, these films do tell a story about our popular culture and the systematic erasure of women of color from the mainstream narrative. When we don't tell certain people's stories, we are telling these people – and everyone else- that their stories

---

New Media in Perpetuating Stereotypes of People of Color." The summit consisted of a panel of media representatives and racial justice advocates.

[129] I treat racially mixed people as people of color in analyses of on screen stereotypes.

[130] Imran Siddiquee, "Why *Sister Act* is One of the Most Important Movies Ever Made," *The Representation Project,* March 6, 2014, accessed December 29, 2015, http://therepresentationproject.org/why-sister-act-is-one-of-the-most-important-movies-ever-made.

[131] Ibid. The top 500 films have generated the most revenue, have the most influence over what types of films will be made in the future, and are the most-seen films all over the world.

[132] The only one starring a woman of color is *Sister Act* (1992) starring Whoopi Goldberg.

[133] Amirah Mercer, "Hollywood's Problem with Women of Color is Even Worse Than You Realize," *Mic,* March 12, 2014, accessed December 29, 2015, https://mic.com/articles/84899/hollywood-s-problem-with-women-of-color-is-even-worse-than-you-realize#.i5lIBO4sS.

> don't matter. That they themselves are less important than those whose stories we do tell.[134]

Leaving out stories about women of color reveals that the film industry has not progressed. "Hollywood has repeatedly supported the telling of one story, and one story only: that of being white and being male."[135]

In Hollywood, black and mixed actors have few roles in all genres of mainstream films and are overrepresented in films that deal with oppression and conflict; in turn, this creates the implicit belief among white viewers that films with black or interracial casts are not about universal themes or everyday people.[136] Increased African American presence in films widely marketed to all racial groups could help white viewers see shared experiences. Including complex characters with relatable stories would contrast with the way some black and mixed characters regularly appear in big budget Hollywood films; they are racially unmarked or coded as white, only featured in background or non-speaking roles, or burdened by race. Ensemble films and romantic comedies (rom-coms) are two types of films that commonly fill roles with actors of a single race, thus attracting a racially homogenous audience. When Jones, Newton, or Rudolph are featured in films from one of these genres, because the rest of the cast is usually one specific race, the three can disrupt the conventional plot if they are not coded as the same race, or, if they don't disrupt the plot, they will often reinforce the tragic and deviant characteristics of mixed race. Such films would be more relevant across audiences if the casts were diverse and did

---

[134] Siddiquee, "Sister Act."

[135] Mercer, "Hollywood's Problem."

[136] See Brandon K. Thorp, "What Does the Academy Value in a Black Performance?" *The New York Times*, February 19, 2016, accessed September 16, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/movies/what-does-the-academy-value-in-a-black-performance.html. African Americans are regularly cast in films "full of enormous characters . . . of world-historic or pop-cultural significance, people who face seemingly intolerable oppression with nigh-unimaginable resolve . . . who are victimized or who encounter and occasionally inflict cruelty. What they're not full of is characters who resemble ordinary people."

not adhere to tropes that have been consistently understood as white (coming of age, teen, romantic comedies, and "chick flicks") or black (historical narratives about slavery, biopics of black celebrities or historical figures).

Popular mixed black actresses including Jones and Rudolph are sometimes cast in lead roles in Hollywood films, but it has become almost routine to code them as white or detached from race when the cast is white and/or the plot is devoid of racial issues, especially in a comedy featuring a romance narrative.[137] Coding mixed actresses as white to maintain the racial exclusiveness of rom-coms works as color-blind racism, as it regularly denies a full identity to their characters. Since big budget romantic comedies remain racially segregated,[138] they are often marketed to and attended by audiences of the same demographic as the cast.[139] Films centered on romances featuring Jones and Rudolph reveal limits to the type of relationships and family connections their characters can have. In dramatic films—such as those featuring Newton, for example—when the actress is playing a non-white or mixed character, romantic relationships are tumultuous or do not last. Andrew T. Weaver's recent study "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies" helps explicate why mixed actresses have difficulty being cast in lead romantic roles in conventional rom-coms. Weaver found that white viewers become less interested in a film when the percentage of black actors is increased: ". . . for romantic films, white participants exhibited a clear preference for films with white romantic

[137] Newton, who is often coded as black, is rarely the lead or a featured character in a romantic comedy.

[138] See Andrew O'Hehir, "'Think Like a Man': Why Are Rom-Coms Still Segregated?" *Salon*, April 12, 2012, accessed September 16, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2012/04/19/think_like_a_man_why_are_rom_coms_still_segregated/.

[139] See Stereo Williams, "*The Best Man Holiday* Fell Flat With White Audiences, Should Black People Care?" *Rollingout*, November 21, 2013, accessed January 10, 2016, http://rollingout.com/2013/11/21/best-man-holiday-fell-flat-white-audiences-black-people-care/. White audiences support historical dramas centered on black experiences, but they tend to stay away from romantic comedies featuring black actors.

couples over both interracial couples and black couples."[140] Therefore, films featuring a mixed, often racially unmarked character among a primarily white cast remain relatable to broad audiences, whereas similar films with black or interracial casts do not draw in white crowds, especially if promoted as "race-themed" and "diverse."[141]

Rom-coms are the primary genre where racially exclusive casting and color-blind racism persists; attempts at post-racial casting and characters end up reaffirming discomfort with mixed race and black characters. Conventional rom-coms are recognizable by consistently white casts and lack of racial issues, because non-white characters can cause confusion over the genre and marketing. Since romantic comedies leave out discussions of race, black characters and racial issues that may surface due to their inclusion go against norms for the genre.[142] Alyssa Rosenberg writes, "Over time, marketing decisions . . . may have helped codify the idea that the simple presence of black actors in a film automatically transfers that film from one genre to another. But that division is hardly a natural one."[143] Weaver writes, "Black actors are most often cast in movies with a specific Black frame of reference. Frequent movie-goers may come to associate these actors with Black themes."[144]

"Black themes" and rom-coms are almost always mutually exclusive. Andrew O'Hehir's explains Hollywood's marketing logic of "love stories:" "if you put an interracial couple in a mainstream movie, you're making an apparent statement, and running the risk of alienating a

---

[140] Andrew T. Weaver, "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies," *Journal of Communication* 61 (2011): 369–85.

[141] Stereo Williams writes that *The Best Man Holiday* (2013) is a rom-com with universal themes, but because of its black ensemble cast, it is not viewed as relatable to all audiences.

[142] For instance, interracial dating, having interracial and mixed family present, racial conflicts, and portraying characters whose race is a part of their identity.

[143] Alyssa Rosenberg, "Why is it Surprising that White Audiences Turned Out for 'Fruitvale Station' and '12 Years a Slave'?" *ThinkProgress*, November 21, 2013, accessed January 10, 2016, https://thinkprogress.org/why-is-it-surprising-that-white-audiences-turned-out-for-fruitvale-station-and-12-years-a-slave-885233d5ce72.

[144] Weaver, 378.

handful of… 'traditional' white viewers."[145] The presence of black characters in a film must be regulated or obscured. If black characters are included in rom-coms, they are often silent background characters or have few lines. "If you make the black couple *too* central, or push the cast beyond, say, one-quarter nonwhite, you reach some perceived tipping point, and it's an 'urban movie.'"[146]

Rom-coms have a formulaic plot and feature white male and female leads and their relationships.[147] According to Mariella Frostrup, "Romantic comedies seem to take over where the fairytales of childhood left off, feeding our dreams of a soulmate."[148] Frostrup also states, "no matter how progressive we imagine we have become, our dating aspirations remain rooted in centuries-old tradition."[149] Despite being deemed "chick-flicks," Chloe Angyal argues, "Romantic comedies shape the beliefs and expectations of even the most cynical and media-savvy among us."[150] They are known to focus exclusively on, "skinny, beautiful, straight white people"[151] reiterating them as the norm. Deviations from such characters could be understood as comprising a different kind of story. Having a mixed character at the center of a romantic comedy often results in an uncomfortable variation from the norm. When Jones, Newton, and Rudolph have lead romantic roles, these films deviate from conventional rom-coms due to an

[145] O'Hehir, "Think Like a Man."

[146] Ibid.

[147] See Juliet Litman, "Know Your Rom-Coms: 6 Tropes of the Genre's Golden Age," *Grantland*, July 21, 2014, accessed Sept 16, 2016, http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/know-your-rom-coms-6-tropes-of-the-genres-golden-age/.

[148] Mariella Frostrup, "Why We're Still Seduced By the Romcom," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2011, accessed January 12, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/sep/17/romcoms-chemistry-crazy-stupid-love.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Chloe Angyal, "I Spent a Year Watching Rom-Coms and This is the Crap I Learned," *Jezebel*, Feb 14, 2012, accessed January 31, 2016, http://jezebel.com/5884946/the-crappy-lessons-of-romantic-comedies.

[151] Ibid.

unconventional plot, a twist on romantic relationships, or a barely visible or doomed romance.[152] Many of these films also code mixed leads as white, valorizing whiteness at the expense of black identity.

As an industry whose films continue to bring in the largest audiences and revenues in the world,[153] Hollywood has the power to shape views concerning race and race relations. The allure of a Hollywood film attracts U.S. and international audiences in ways that are unmatched by other movie production companies. Marchetti writes, "Hollywood sets norms, breaks taboos, offers forbidden pleasures, and maintains existing, unequal racial, gender, and class hierarchies."[154] If Hollywood chose to racially diversify historically white film genres, the appearance of mixed characters may no longer disrupt particular genres, and an interracial cast would not automatically change the target audience. Tom Jacobs writes, "If multiracial casts became the norm and movies were marketed to all demographics, the stigma could fade away. Thus, racial statistics in this area could shift."[155] Jacobs argues that , if Hollywood were willing to take the financial risk, exposure to varied stories could help white audiences see themselves in narratives despite the race of the characters.[156] However, until Hollywood diversifies casting and marketing, films will continue to portray familiar love stories with default casts, interracial

[152] See *I Love You, Man*, *Away We Go*, *Bridesmaids*, and *Flirting*.

[153] Michael J. Haupert, *Entertainment Industry: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 75.

[154] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

[155] Tom Jacobs, "Why Whites Avoid Movies with Black Actors," *Pacific Standard*, May 4, 2011, accessed April 18, 2015, https://psmag.com/social-justice/why-whites-avoid-movies-with-black-actors-30890.

[156] Ibid.

relationships and mixed individuals will remain in the margins, and roles for mixed and non-white performers will remain scarce.[157]

For mixed performers, especially those who appear ambiguous, taking on racially neutral or white roles may be easier, due to their abundance, than seeking out the limited roles for black or multiracial actresses. A University of Southern California (USC) study found that in Hollywood, black characters comprise only 10.8% of speaking roles.[158] Though Jones, Newton, and Rudolph can play ethnicities or races beyond black, the USC study ascertained that speaking roles are even more limited for Asians (5%), Hispanics (4.2%), and Other (3.6%).[159] Playing a racially unmarked character may be more than a marker of transcending race; it may also be one of the only ways mixed African Americans can access roles.

In part, due to the preference for light-skinned and mixed-race performers, Jones, Newton, and Rudolph have succeeded at exceeding racial categories and consequently escaped some of the lingering social and economic inequalities faced by African American and mixed actresses with darker skin.[160] Those with lighter skin have versatility not available to their darker counterparts. In terms of attaining work, Nix and Qian posit, "there may be reason to believe that race is, to some extent, a choice made by an individual because of social-economic and political factors."[161] Those with lighter skin who fit an ambiguous or multiracial identity and assert it may

[157] See Stereo Williams. Films with non-white casts are viewed as not applicable to white audiences if they are not from a white perspective.

[158] Rebecca Keegan, "USC Study: Minorities Still Under-Represented in Popular Films," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2013, accessed February 11, 2014, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/30/entertainment/la-et-mn-race-and-movies-20131030.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Here I include both light-skinned (but not racially mixed) actresses and mixed-race actresses who are the product of a white parent. The latter is more contentious and complex, as it comes with a history of being illicit and illegal. Naomi Pabst gives a thorough analysis of these two forms of black identity in: Naomi Pabst, "Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations Over Crossing Signs," *Cultural Critique* 54 (2003): 178–212.

[161] Emily Nix and Nancy Qian, "Is Race a Choice?" *Vox*, January 26, 2015, accessed July 1, 2015, http://voxeu.org/article/race-choice.

gain increased employment.[162] This is advantageous in Hollywood where whites occupied 73.1% of film roles in 2014 and African Americans were featured in 12.5%.[163] African American performers who are celebrated across communities often bear some similarities to whites such as visible racial mixture or identifying as being of European ancestry.

As the career trajectories of Jones, Newton, and Rudolph indicate, the dominant culture and mainstream society's discomfort with confronting racial issues and the disparate treatment of people of color are replicated on screen in the representation of mixed-race characters. Present day portrayals of mixed race remain fraught; their constructions regularly reveal privileging of white over black, or an erasure of black identity. Detaching from black ancestry turns a mixed character into a racially unmarked, often awkwardly formed character that is meant to fit in better with a white cast. The work that must be done to manage mixed race reveals that despite some progress, mixed characters remain disruptive and noticeably change character interactions and relationships; they also counter assertions that race no longer holds significance.

Chapter Outline

Chapter one presents a close reading of the film and television career of racially mixed performer Rashida Jones, which coincided with the increased celebratory treatment of racially mixed and ethnically ambiguous celebrities. Beginning with her earliest acting endeavors, Jones' career reveals the way her most popular, award-winning, and most visible characters have been

[162] See Horowitz. "Joanne Hartshorne who is biracial (African-American and Caucasian), says 'I don't like labels. But being ethnically ambiguous has helped me.' Hartshorne states casting calls, 'specially asked for a light-skinned African-American to play a character who was half Brazilian.'" See La Ferla: Vin Diesel "once downplayed his multiracial heritage. . . . But in more recent interviews he has acknowledged that his mixed background has been an asset, allowing him to play all types of roles and ethnicities."

[163] Laura Santhanam and Megan Hickey, "Out of 30,000 Hollywood Film Characters, Here's How Many Weren't White," *PBS*, September 22, 2015, accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/30000-hollywood-film-characters-heres-many-werent-white/. Note, this statistic is for all roles, while the USC study focused on speaking roles.

racially coded and how these codings have shifted towards erasing her characters' race during the course of the twenty-first century.

As a celebrity whose mixed background is well known, and whose early roles involved playing mixed or ambiguous characters, Jones became a symbol of mixed race. Her on-screen presence grew from supporting or guest starring television roles, to lead roles, small film roles, lead film roles, and eventually to a lead film role she wrote for herself. Yet despite Jones' rise to stardom coinciding with diversifying casting and increased images of mixed race on screen, she often played characters coded as Italian American or ambiguous; they were never specifically mixed-race, nor was there emphasis on non-white cultural or ethnic identity. When Jones' characters were constructed as mixed or "hybrid," they did not adhere to any particular race or ethnicity. Even as Jones gained lead roles in Hollywood films, her characters were constructed as racially neutral or detached from race.

Jones has been successful playing different races; however, several of her presumably mixed-race roles reveal color-blind racism that complicates the racial progressiveness she is said to symbolize. The majority of her mixed characters are constructed in ways that obscure her black ancestry, highlight racial ambiguity, or erase race. Often, these characters lack full dimension since their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is absent, and they are not presented with family members to give context to their ancestry. Such characters also appear tragic or deviant; they stand out from the main cast and pose a threat, they are sexually promiscuous, or their romantic relationships fail. When cast alongside white male leads lead, her characters are racially unmarked and partially formed; they are only significant for what they provide the male leads. Many of Jones' character constructions reveal a perpetual unease with casting mixed actresses and coding mixed characters, as well as with the interracial element that may be

brought to on-screen relationships if their backgrounds are understood as other than white. By examining Jones' most widespread, fan favorite, and lead roles, this work reveals changing meanings and levels of acceptance of mixed race, affirming of color-blind racism, and flaws in attempts at racial progress in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Chapter two is a close reading of the film career of Thandie Newton, a part-Zimbabwean, part-English actress who spent most of her life outside of America but is racialized in ways similar to mixed-race African American actresses. Though not from the same racial history as American mixed-race performers, on-screen she is trapped in similar tropes. Stereotypes of mixed African American women that are prevalent in Hollywood are applied to Newton despite her cultural and physical distance from the U.S. revealing how powerful and enduring United States racial discourse can be. Similar to American mixed-race performers, Newton is celebrated for her multifaceted background and for playing mixed and ambiguous characters, she is also cast as black and performs in black ensemble films. Unlike mixed performers whose career trajectories show roles moving away from black and toward unmarked characters coded white, Newton's black and mixed roles are interspersed, and despite success at acting across races, she is outspoken about the limitations placed on black performers. In interviews, Newton's public image of mixed race incorporates black ancestry rather than conforming to only a celebratory or trendy representation.

Newton's mixed-race identity was a source of pain and marginalization that eventually became symbolic of racial progress, yet most of her mixed characters only experience conflict and isolation and never gain redemption. These repeated images of partially formed mixed-race female characters at a time when the mainstream news media was praising racial mixture revealed conflicting ideas of mixed race, which played out in Newton's roles. Instead of

depicting mixed ancestry as benign or positive to match post-racial ideology, Newton's characters' non-white race was responsible for their social isolation and tragedy. Informed by antiquated stereotypes, these characters continued to be portrayed as tied to illicit sexual behavior or past sexual abuse. Even when purposely critiquing racism against black and mixed women, directors' white privilege and male gaze often resulted in reverting back to common but degrading tropes or conflating Newton's characters with deviance and hyper-sexuality. These characters were then repeatedly lusted after or abused by white males. Some of Newton's award-winning roles and fan favorites are those where her characters are the classic tragic mulatta, a modern-day woman heavily burdened by racial mixture, or disruptive young females in need of reprimanding due to the temptation they cause in men. Of the three performers I analyze, Newton's roles reveal the most unease with mixed-race women and a resistance to portraying them apart from the trappings of racial conflict.

This chapter will also show how the response to Newton's casting underscores the limitations faced by mixed black performers representing singular black ancestry. Newton has been criticized for taking on roles where her mixed race, lighter skin, European features, and Western background made her an inappropriate choice to play an African or African American woman. The frustration over Newton's casting reveals challenges that come with having mixed actors playing black characters even when black identity is regularly recognized as diverse in its origins, appearance, ethnic ancestry, and nationality.

Chapter three is a critical analysis of the career of groundbreaking comedian and actress Maya Rudolph. As black, mixed race, and female, Rudolph is a pioneer for all three groups in sketch comedy. Yet, despite being known as a black performer, Rudolph can be cast as race neutral. As this chapter demonstrates, Rudolph is an exceptional mixed-race performer. She has a

level of racial fluidity that is often denied to black and mixed-race performers. She acts across races, rejects racial designations, and would rather be known for her comedic talent. Such sentiment can cause backlash from critics and fans, but being known as an impersonator and continually playing all races means audiences are familiar with her as a cross-racial performer. Her black identity is also reaffirmed each time she is recognized for her immense contribution to black women in comedy. Despite playing some characters that lack racial identity, the frequency with which Rudolph crosses races, and the way her roles break boundaries for mixed, black, and female actors/comedians, mean that even when her characters do conform to some stereotypes of mixed race, she remains unscathed.

A close study of Rudolph's career trajectory reveals racially fluid casting that contributes to her symbolizing an era where ethnic and racial ambiguity is desirable. Her response to being racially defined is complex; despite major success as a black and mixed-race comedian and actress, she routinely asserts that race has not significantly impacted her life. Rudolph also refrains from attributing significance to the race of characters written for her. She wins awards specific to black performers even while cast in roles where her characters are detached from black ancestry or any racial background at all.

Rudolph's achievements are often out of reach for most black performers. While she breaks barriers, her image of blackness relies on mixed ancestry that represents a twenty-first century post-race ideal; she is light skinned and racially ambiguous appearing. Despite being known as a black comedian, her partially white ancestry has shaped her career trajectory. Unlike most black performers, Rudolph's racial fluidity meant she could take on roles without her race defining the race of her character. Race could be left out of her character's life and the film. Even while playing mixed and part-black characters, the lack of emphasis on race implied that these

non-white characters represented the lessening significance of race in the twenty-first century. Rudolph now receives top billing in big-budget Hollywood films playing any race or race-less characters. Her regular cross-racial performances reaffirm that race is not a completely defining or limiting feature. However, correlating Rudolph's achievements with casting becoming color-blind or post-racial is problematic; her ability to transcend race is unique and also relies on her ambiguous appearance. When her characters are racially unmarked, casting Rudolph does not necessarily challenge racial barriers, but can deny racial difference and reinforce whiteness.[164]

Finally, the way Rudolph can be cast differentiates her from other African American actresses; she can obtain top billing while not disrupting a film from being marketed broadly. She fits a race-neutral image that is often off limits to non-whites. She can also play a lead mixed African American character, but the film does not become a black film or a film focused on racial issues. Unlike many black actresses, Rudolph's characters are often racially unmarked or constructed as almost white; paired with white romantic partners, they do not disrupt an otherwise all white cast.[165] Rudolph's popularity across audiences makes it appear that her race is almost irrelevant. However, the strides she has made as a black actress reiterate the privileging of mixed over black performers; those with racial and cultural similarity to whites are rewarded.

The conclusion argues that through mixed-race performers, black identity becomes more diverse, but the increase in racially mixed actors playing black characters is problematic when opportunities decrease for those lacking a mixed appearance or those with darker skin. When mixed race replaces black, non-mixed black performers continue to be marginalized. Since the majority of popular mixed performers have European ancestry, when they are preferred over

[164] In a comment to Beltrán, "What's at Stake," LeiLani Nishime wrote, "My concern is that the leap to post-race is not a challenge to a white hegemony, but race and racism is driven underground."

[165] An exception is *Away We Go*.

single-race black performers, racial hierarchies, colorism, and preference for Western standards of beauty are revealed. The use of mixed race to stand for racial diversity and for black is further complicated when some of the most popular mixed performers do not want to be defined by race, and their characters range from ambiguous to detached from race.

Rashida Jones, Thandie Newton, and Maya Rudolph helped increase the presence of mixed race and black actresses on screen, yet their work reinforces color-blind racism and white privilege when their characters are coded as white and race is diminished or erased. In many of Jones' and Rudolph's lead or featured roles, their presence is a win for black and mixed performers but comes at the cost of being detached from race to fit in with the white cast. Such performances reaffirm white racial hierarchy as the identities of mixed or minority characters are made insignificant.

Despite mixed-race performers being celebrated for their multifaceted backgrounds and ability to play various races, there are also limits to how far mixed-race performers can go with respect to embodying blackness and playing black characters. When cast in roles that could have gone to a black performer, especially playing a real person or a well-known fictional character, they have been deemed the wrong fit for the role. When racially mixed actresses win these roles, they represent the privileging light skin and celebrity over realistic portrayals and increasing opportunities for black and darker-skinned performers to play others like themselves. Mixed performers add complexity to casting; they can highlight the varying shades and appearances of black and mixed people, but it is problematic when they gain roles that would be more authentically represented by single-race black actresses or eliminate opportunities for the most marginalized.

Casting of mixed-race performers can also reveal discomfort with race that contradicts

claims of racial progress in the twenty-first century. Racial identities of mixed performers are regularly erased in films that have a white cast and when the film does not include racial issues. The result is a character that lacks a full identity in comparison to white characters. Conversely, when playing black characters, mixed performers can be viewed as inappropriate for a role if they do not visually appear as what is commonly understood as black. Further, while erasing race may be an option for some mixed performers, it is almost impossible for most non-white performers; few can be cast across races regardless of their ancestry.

Mixed individuals in the public light bear a burden of representation; yet as symbols of racial harmony, they obscure persistent racial inequality. Celebrating mixed race appears to be a way to increase diversity and open doors to non-whites, but preferences for lighter skin and appearances that more closely resemble white are reveal latent racism and the further marginalization of black performers. On-screen productions hint at racial progress by casting mixed performers in featured and lead roles, but these same roles can also reveal limits to racial progressiveness when they harken back to an era when people of color, mixed or not, were denied being cast, even as their own race.

CHAPTER ONE

Rashida Jones: A symbol of the 'post-racial' era[1]

Rashida Jones' racially mixed background, equating multiracial people with racial accord, and rising celebrity in the early decades of the twenty-first century caused the popular actress, singer, writer, comedian, and model to become a symbol of what many see as new era of racial harmony in the United States. Jones is the younger daughter of interracial celebrity couple Quincy Jones and Peggy Lipton, whose union itself has been seen as illustrative of a breakthrough in race relations. Jones was born on February 25, 1976, in Los Angeles, California. She became immersed in music and performance as a child due to her father's legendary career as a musical composer and producer, and has since made a name for herself through her acting performances in television and film.

Through Jones' various assertions of her identity, both racial fluidity and the limits imposed on mixed-race identification are revealed. Jones discussed the shifting nature of her identifications in an interview with Shelia Weller of *Glamour*, remarking, "I defined myself as multicultural" but when expected to "choose one thing to be: black or white. I chose black."[2] At Harvard University, Jones joined several black organizations and black theater productions. Jones told Brantley Bardin of *Women's Health Magazine* that starring in Harvard rendition of Ntozake Shange's powerful choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*[3] helped her embrace her "black cultural identity."[4] Participation in a black

[1] Sean O'Neal, "Rashida Jones," *A.V. Club*, April 8, 2009, accessed November 1, 2010, http://www.avclub.com/article/rashida-jones-26240.

[2] Sheila Weller, "Are you white or are you black?" *Glamour*, June 2005, 244–47, 259, 267.

[3] Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf* (New York: Scribner, 1997).

ensemble production that emphasizes black sisterhood was a way to be recognized as a black woman.

Post-college, Jones' early television and film career consisted of playing primarily black or mixed-race characters, but the range of her characters broadened as her popularity increased. Soon she appeared in more ambiguous roles. Often Jones' characters were constructed as racially neutral, in line with the turn of the twenty-first-century trend of emphasizing mixed but racially unidentifiable people. Recently, Jones has been constructed as having an indeterminate identity. Sometimes her characters are detached from any ethnic or racial signifiers, and in these cases, she appears ambiguous or white. The Critical Media Project explains, "Whiteness is different from other races and ethnicities because it is essentially neutral or . . . understood to be invisible."[5] Interviewers, especially for mass-market publications, asked Jones fewer questions about her racial identity as her roles moved away from African American and mixed race and leaned toward ambiguous and neutral. Though Jones has a racially fluid identity and could play various races, she was cast in roles that privileged white identity and completely erased race.

Jones' mixed background was a popular topic with the media; she had an identity that began as isolating and was later constructed as trendy. In 2005, Sheila Weller of *Glamour* deemed Rashida and her older sister Kidada "pioneers . . . coming of age on the racial cutting edge," as mainstream media was celebrating mixed-race people for their ability to heal past racial divisions.[6] The sisters' multiracial background was used to symbolize racial progress being

---

[4] Brantley Bardin, "Meet Karen From the Office: Interview with Rashida Jones," *Women's Health Magazine*, March 2008, accessed June 22, 2017, http://www.womenshealthmag.com/sex-and-love/rashida-jones-interview.

[5] USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, "Whiteness," *The Critical Media Project*, n.d., accessed June 6, 2016, http://www.criticalmediaproject.org/cml/topicbackground/race-ethnicity/white/. *The Critical Media Project* is a resource for educators centered on using various forms of media to "explore the politics of identity across issues of race and ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality."

[6] Weller, 246.

made in the United States and a future where mixed race was more common. However, the sisters also discussed how they were burdened by their physical appearances. Jones' childhood peers denied her assertions of a part-black identity because it conflicted with her appearance—light hair and green eyes—which they deemed "so white"[7] Kidada, on the other hand, was accepted as African American since she had darker skin and curly hair. Jones' more Caucasian look created distance between the two; Kidada felt her sister "passed for white," while Jones was hurt that her blackness was questioned, and constantly asserted her black ancestry.[8]

Quincy Jones and Peggy Lipton's divorce meant their daughters also split up, at which point they adopted contrasting racial and cultural identities. Kidada, lived with her father and, having darker skin, felt more comfortable with black friends and culture; she chose to attend a black high school. Rashida, who was more visually similar to her European and Jewish mother and excelled in exclusive, primarily white schools, stayed with Lipton and only visited Kidada and her father on weekends.[9] As Kidada immersed herself in 1990s Hip Hop and R&B culture, Rashida enrolled at Harvard.[10] Kidada had long been defined by others as black and had accepted that identity years earlier.[11] Throughout college, Rashida felt "identity-less."[12] She was not automatically accepted as black due to her light skin, and at the same time was making an effort to learn more about her Jewish ancestry.[13] Eventually, she realized she was "a floater" as she

[7] Ibid., 259. Kidada says Rashida identifies as "black, white, Jewish." Rashida says others just call her "white."

[8] Weller, 247.

[9] Weller, 259. Another difference between the sisters was Rashida's love of books and Kidada's dyslexia; these contributed to their very different approaches to school.

[10] Kidada befriended the late popular R&B singer Aaliyah and dated late notorious rap artist Tupac Shakur.

[11] Weller, 247.

[12] Weller, 259.

[13] Weller, 267.

embraced being "black, white, Jewish" and made friends of different races and with varying social interests.[14]

Jones' own affiliations and appearance, and the media's fascination with her mixed race and ambiguous character roles, led to the media pointing to her as a symbol of multiracial harmony that tended to supersede her black identity. Many of Jones' candid and emotional assertions of her black identity came shortly before appearing regularly on prime-time television, i.e., NBC's "Must See TV," and in Blockbuster Hollywood films. The award-winning success of *The Office* and her debut as the lead actress in *I Love You, Man*[15] brought Jones increased commercial success, but also showed her in roles that obscured her mixed race or did not discuss race at all.[16] Jones' on-screen image and its depiction by the media transitioned from a mixed-race, part-black identity to more racially ambiguous identity that was detached from race. Jones publicly asserted that her mixed heritage allowed her to adopt various identities and be a part of multiple races. She stated, "I'm lucky because I have so many clashing cultural, racial things going on: black, Jewish, Irish, Portuguese, Cherokee. I can float and be part of any community I want."[17] However, simultaneous identifications have proven problematic in an industry that seeks to define performers singularly. Dagbovie-Mullins writes that Jones "intimates that the future will bring about less restrictive views on race, perhaps when identifying as black and claiming a mixed-race identity will not be seen a mutually exclusive."[18] Yet, film critics and

---

[14] Weller, 259, 267.

[15] *I Love You, Man*, directed by John Hammond (Paramount Home Video, 2009), DVD.

[16] *The Office*, written by Mindy Kaling, Greg Daniels, and Michael Schur (NBC Universal Television Distribution, 2005–2013), Television. *The Office* was regularly recognized for its success as a comedy. It received numerous Primetime Emmys, Screen Actors Guild, and Writers Guild of America nominations and awards.

[17] Bardin. Many of Jones' self-identifications or media identifications do not mention her Cherokee and Portuguese heritage. Her black, Jewish, and Irish ancestries often take precedence.

[18] Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, *Crossing Black: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture* (Knoxville: University of Texas Press, 2013), 126.

interviewers helped distance Jones from a black identification when they emphasized her mixed race rather than her previous identity assertions. Not addressing Jones' black ancestry mirrored her on-screen coding as racially neutral in *I Love You, Man*, and in work that followed.

Coinciding with her rising stardom, and the 2009 presidential inauguration of Barack Obama, Jones' image was conflated with post-race and a new era of opportunities for racially mixed individuals. In an April 8, 2009 interview, Sean O'Neal of *A.V. Club* asked Jones, "Do you feel like you're something of a symbol for this new 'post-racial age' we're supposedly living in?"[19] This type of questioning followed Jones in subsequent interviews, as her image was repeatedly used to represent a new era in American race relations. Answering O'Neal, Jones expressed pride in being mixed in an era where some racial barriers were beginning to be transgressed: "All the questions about, 'what are you? Why don't you look like this?' Are gonna start to fade away and more and more, every single day, you're seeing it."[20] Jones commented on her responsibility to be a positive representative and help open doors for other mixed females to get involved in performing arts, knowing many were discouraged due to lack of diversity in the entertainment industries.[21] Jones declared, "I feel if I can just keep myself busy as a part of a bunch of different things, maybe it will make room for more black-Jewish-Irish girls to do shit."[22] Despite this proud assertion of her multifaceted background and desire to work toward racial inclusion, Jones' later works reveal distance from identifying as any particular race and coding her own characters as detached from race.[23]

---

[19] O'Neal.

[20] O'Neal.

[21] Jones also sings professionally (she was a background singer for the pop band Maroon 5) and writes screenplays. However, part of Jones' success can be attributed to her parents' careers in music and film.

[22] O'Neal.

[23] See analysis of her character Celeste in *Celeste and Jesse Forever*.

Though Jones recognizes difficulties that multiracial actresses, and women in general,[24] undergo in entertainment industries, her views, mirrored by the media, were that the celebration of mixed race could increase opportunities for them.[25] Jones' forecast of an end to the dilemmas of being mixed and being able to cross races without criticism is in line with mainstream media's projection of the change in race relations due to the rising numbers of multiracial individuals coming of age and embracing of all of their racial identities.[26] In "Generation EA," La Ferla deemed mixed race trendy and fashionable, evidence of a new generation of children who had been born from interracial relationships: "the new reality of America, which includes considerable mixing" and "the acceptance of a melting-pot chic."[27] Echoing progressive beliefs that race will matter much less when everyone is mixed, La Ferla discusses how at the turn of the twenty-first century, Hollywood, through casting breakdowns, sought more racially mixed, ambiguous-appearing performers than ever before. Scholars such as Guterl also critique the many ways of seeing ambiguity and it being desired over particular racial identities, especially in clothing industries that market to a wide range of consumers. In the fashion industry, where models' bodies are used to appeal and sell to anyone, ambiguous appearances are relatable to all, since they can be interpreted as various races. Guterl writes "The multiracial backgrounds in play weren't subject to any specificity—all that mattered was the 'fact' of racial mixture itself."[28] The multiracial bodies that project varied racial combinations and a twenty-first century look transcend fixed and singular notions of race in the same way Jones' image has been used. Since

[24] See Maureen Dowd, "The Women of Hollywood Speak Out," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2015, accessed December 20, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/magazine/the-women-of-hollywood-speak-out.html.

[25] See Dagbovie-Mullins, 126. She mentions the interview with O'Neal and Jones' optimism about the future acceptance of racially mixed people and their claiming multiple identities simultaneously.

[26] See Weller. Jones remarked, in college, "I realized: I'm a floater. I float among groups."

[27] La Ferla.

[28] Guterl, 182.

she has not only identified by black ancestry, but embodies dual and neutral identities, Jones' image is able to "sell the idea of racial pluralism and freedom."[29] She can be viewed as "America's desired other."[30] Jones can also stand for "America's future."[31] Jones' multiple racial identities co-exist. Her non-conventional appearance diverges from the norm but is acceptable and even desirable due to her mixture having part European ancestry that makes her visibly appear part white.

Mainstream media played a considerable role in linking Jones to the first racially mixed African American President and reiterating the significance of her mixed identity in the twenty-first century United States. Concluding the *A.V. Club* interview with Jones, O'Neal signed off saying, "Thanks to you. And Barack Obama."[32] Barack Obama's election to the Presidency in 2008 was deemed proof that racial tolerance had been achieved and that the U.S. was moving fast toward racial equality. Like Jones, the new President and his multiracial background symbolized a new era, one in which racism would retreat to the past and where multiracial individuals were held up as evidence of accord between races. At no other time in American history have mixed-race individuals been instilled with such hope and burdened with such grandiose expectations for mending race relations. Tasked with such expectations, Jones' on-screen career revealed a complex acceptance of mixed race and racial fluidity; her characters were increasingly coded as white while, at the same time, she was making considerable accomplishments in Hollywood as a mixed-race and part-black performer and writer.

[29] Dagbovie, 232.

[30] Dagbovie, 225.

[31] Ibid., 232.

[32] O'Neal.

Many of Jones' initial characters were not specifically coded as black or bi-racial through signifiers such as name, parentage, asserting racial affiliations, or being part of black cultural communities; yet, many had evident racial mixture, or were premised on "shallow stereotypes" particular to black and mixed women.[33] Notable early television appearances included NBC's *Freaks and Geeks*[34] (1999–2000), FOX's *Boston Public*[35] (2000–2002), and Comedy Central's *Chappelle's Show*[36] (2003–2005). On *Freaks*, Jones' character was coded as ambiguous due to her sexual deviancy, and as Italian American evidenced by her surname, nonconformity often attributed to Italian Americans, and common stereotypes used to distinguish Italians from other whites. On *Boston* and *Chappelle's*, Jones played bi-racial and black characters respectively. In the former, her character, Louisa Fenn, asserted her mixed black and white race in conversation; in the latter, the context of *Chappelle's Show* and its portrayal of distinct differences between the races situated Jones' characters as black. These roles led to Jones' nomination for an award specific to black performances: her role on *Boston* earned her a nomination for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series (2002).

Following these initial TV roles, Jones' character, Karen Filipelli, on *The Office* (2006 and two appearances in 2007 and 2008) was suspected of being mixed-race by her coworkers, but was loosely coded as Italian. After appearing in a lead role without a racial identification in the film *I Love You, Man* (2009), Jones played more ambiguous or racially unmarked lead roles

[33] Ariel Cheung, "Black Women's Progress Collides with Media Stereotypes," *USA Today*, February 11, 2015, accessed May 25, 2016, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/11/black-history-black-women/23266115/.

[34] *Freaks and Geeks*, directed by Paul Feig and Judd Apatow (Paramount Worldwide, 1999–2000), DVD.

[35] *Boston Public*, created by David E. Kelly (20th Century Fox Television, 2000–2004), Television.

[36] *Chappelle's Show*, created by Dave Chappelle (MGM Television, 2003–2006), Television. Technically, *Chappelle's Show* only premiered for two full seasons and half of a third season (2003–2005). Yet, in mid-2006, the network released three pre-recorded shows without Chappelle present.

on TV's *Parks and Recreation*[37] (2009–2015), where she received two NAACP Image Award nominations for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series (2013 and 2014), and in *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (2012), earning her Black Reel Awards nominations for Best Actress and Best Screenplay.[38]

Racial and Sexual Deviancy – Playing Karen Scarfolli on *Freaks and Geeks*

Jones' sole appearance as Karen Scarfoli in the cult classic, high school comedy-drama, *Freaks and Geeks*[39] is a significant part of her filmography,[40] and one in a series of performances where she was coded as racially or ethnically different from the rest of the cast, but where her race was not addressed.[41] Karen is a formulaic on-screen high school bully, intimidating and assaulting younger students. As a female, Karen may be an unlikely tormentor; however her age, size, and confidence make it possible for her to instill fear in freshman boys of smaller stature. Karen is also visually distinct. Her darker complexion contrasts with the fair-skinned Chippewa High students, primarily Sam Weir, the "geek" she torments, and Kim Kelly, the "freak" she angers.

Besides visually differing from the rest of the cast, Karen's non-conformity is also portrayed through her sexual promiscuity. She is desirable to boys, but unable to maintain a romance. Though Karen is not given specific ethnic or racial signifiers, the homogenous and

[37] *Parks and Recreation*, written by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur (San Francisco, NBC, KNTV, 2009–2015), Television. On *Parks*, Jones' ethnic ambiguity is commented on but she does not embody a specific race or ethnicity.

[38] *Celeste and Jesse Forever*, directed by Lee Toland Krieger (Sony Pictures Classics, 2012), Film.

[39] *Freaks and Geeks* was based on events that happened to the creator or at least one of the writers in high school. It aired for one season and had 18 episodes.

[40] Interviewers still ask Jones about *Freaks*, and fans of the show and of Jones continually reference Karen Scarfolli.

[41] See Robert Lloyd, "2 Good 2 Be 4Gotten: An Oral History of *Freaks and Geeks*," *Vanity Fair*, January 2013, accessed March 21, 2013. "The cult following for its single 1999 season – still growing, on *Netflix*."

conservative nature of the town and school cause her to stand out. Due to the way Karen's behavior is coded, she fits on-screen tropes of Italian Americans and common associations of racially mixed females, groups that have long been associated with inherent deviance stemming from their ancestry.

In Episode Four, "Kim Kelly is My Friend," set during the 1980–81 school year at Michigan's Chippewa High, Karen Scarfoli causes trouble with both the freaks and the geeks, and her deviancy results in her being ostracized by both groups. Karen's initial scene accentuates her tough demeanor that matches the bullying behavior and stoic persona of the "freaks," and insinuates her sexual promiscuity; she is also differentiated from the passive "geeks" and the naïve female students. "Freaks," juniors and seniors like Karen, cut school, get into verbal and physical confrontations, and are deemed outcasts. The "geeks," primarily freshmen, are dutiful students, enjoy science experiments and games like Magic the Gathering, and are sexually inexperienced—all common portrayals of nerds on screen.[42] Sean Trundle describes a young scientist as "a boyish nerd."[43] He states, "One of the defining characteristics of the nerd in popular culture was his seeming emasculation."[44] In the halls of the high school, the "freaks" guilt-trip nerdy Millie (Sarah Hagan) into giving them some of the donuts she brought for her French class. Karen approaches, walking backwards and engaged in conversation with Daniel's off-and-on girlfriend, "freak" Kim Kelly (Busy Philipps).[45] She bumps into Millie, sending donuts to the floor; the camera zooms in on Karen as she angrily admonishes the already

[42] Sean Trundle, "Hope and Anxiety on the Endless Frontier: Scientists, State Policy and the Popular Imagination" (doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2013), 172–173.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] "Freaks," Daniel and Kim in particular, are social misfits. They come from broken families due to their parents being unavailable, unstable, or incarcerated. They live in working class neighborhoods. Some are highly sexually active. Most do poorly in school, break rules, and are a contrast to main character, Lindsay Weir, and the "geeks."

distraught Millie. Karen's moodiness prompts Nick to ask her what her problem is. The camera cuts from the "freaks" to another close-up of Karen as she angrily replies, "my problem is your face, dirt-bag," and then exits the scene.[46] Kim tells the group that Karen was just dumped and is "on the war path."[47] The camera centers on the group as they stuff their mouths with donuts, and Daniel remarks, "Well, if she's looking for new customers, I'm up for a test drive."[48] Laughter ensues from Kim and Nick. This first mention of Karen's potential openness to sex sets up a later scene when Kim verbally assaults Karen for responding to Daniel's flirting.

The "freaks" are not fazed by Karen's fury, but her next target of abuse is a fearful "geek," and Karen's cruelty is elevated in a way that soon comes back to haunt her. "Geek" Sam Wier (John Francis Daley) mistakes Karen's locker for his own, for which he is verbally and physically punished. Karen's face is the focus of the shot, her furrowed brow highlighted and her abrasive words emphasized. As Sam attempts to back away and looks worriedly at his friends, other "geeks," the camera catches them rolling their eyes; they are used to being targets of abuse. Karen shoves Sam and pulls up his shirt, revealing his tiny physique and embarrassing him. The camera catches glimpses of their respective friends, self-assured Kim and the uneasy "geeks, reiterating the power of the "freaks" over the younger, smaller students. Finally, the camera closes in on Karen as she pulls out her pink lipstick, a feminine contrast to her clothing and demeanor, and marks Sam's locker with large letters spelling out GEEK. Karen then backs the "geeks" into a corner, emphasizing her control and their fear.

The next scene, despite Karen's absence, constructs her as promiscuous, a transgressor of social boundaries, and more of a rebel than the "freaks." Eating lunch in the crowded cafeteria

---

[46] *Freaks and Geeks*.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

without Karen, the "freaks" gossip about her sexual behavior that led to her getting dumped. Daniel asks Kim if Karen was dumped for being a prude and elicits laughter from the table. Kim replies, "She's not a prude, she's a slut, obviously. Karen hooked up with Ricky's older brother. Yesterday, he walked in on them."[49] Here, the camera cuts back and forth between Kim, who is divulging the gossip and Lindsay (Linda Cardellini), an innocent "freak" wanna-be. As Kim draws out the story to keep Daniel's attention, the camera closes in on Lindsay's facial expressions as they range from interested to concerned to uncomfortable, reiterating that Karen's sexual behavior is not the norm.[50]

Karen's penchant for getting the attention of boys ends up causing her downfall, and reiterating that deviancy can go too far even for a "freak." After school, Kim and Lindsay drive to the park to look for Daniel. As Kim's car approaches the park, the camera pans from Nick shooting hoops, to the empty picnic tables, and finally closes in on Daniel seductively leaning over Karen sitting below him on a bench. The music is a relaxing blues song matching the lazy, sunny afternoon. The idyllic park scene is soon disrupted as the camera cuts back to the inside of Kim's car. As they spot Karen and Daniel, Lindsay's worried face and Kim's escalating anger abruptly change the mood of the scene. The camera crosscuts between Daniel and Karen as his fingers and thumb touch her face and come closer to her mouth, and Kim's enraged face. The music also becomes louder and faster, adding intensity and mirroring Kim's impending breakdown. As the camera cuts back to a medium shot of Karen and Daniel, the focus is now on his thumb touching her lips and her seductively taking it in her mouth. Seeing this implication of sex, Kim drives straight toward them, tires screeching. Driving onto the grass as the music

[49] Ibid.

[50] Lindsay is also shown in conversation with Millie as Millie expresses outrage that Kim has had sex. Lindsay is trying to be a part of the "freaks;" thus, she does not reveal her discomfort.

continues to play, Kim lunges and screams almost incomprehensively, "You are dead! You are so dead!" as she struggles to maintain control of the car.[51] When Kim's car is finally gone from the scene, the camera focuses on Nick and Daniel, with Karen standing between them. She does not speak, but her face looks pained and guilty. Soon, she runs off, leaving the boys behind and an empty space between them.

Karen's final appearance helps to unite the "freaks" and "geeks;" both groups now hate Karen and will make her pay for wreaking havoc. Kim makes Karen's sexual deviancy public and shames her in front of the "geeks," earning redemption for Sam and eventually leaving Karen friendless. Once again, the bustling hallways are where Karen angrily confronts the "geeks." The camera focuses on Karen as she arrives at her locker and sees the word SLUT written in large block letters. Catching sight of Sam, she immediately accuses him. As the camera focuses on Sam's confused and fearful expression, we also see Kim who had been standing behind Sam. She approaches Karen and asserts that she graffitied Karen's locker, spitting out the words, "I did it, because you are a slut, slut."[52] The camera crosscuts to Karen as she attempts to defend her interactions with Daniel, saying, "Hey, he hit on me."[53] Kim, hovers over Karen and stares her down, saying, "Oh yeah, well after school, I'm gonna hit on you."[54] Karen then runs out of the hall and out of their lives. Ambient music resumes, mirroring the return to order and the end of tense hallway interactions.

By being a bully and a slut, Karen caused friction with both groups of misfits and unwillingly helped them find common ground in their hatred of her; her interactions with both

[51] Ibid.

[52] *Freaks and Geeks*.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

groups also highlighted her divergence from normative whiteness, causing her to blatantly stand apart.[55] Though no reference is made to Karen's race or ethnicity, her surname, Scarfolli, plays on an Italian name that matches her fierce persona. The "Scar" references a disfigurement left on the body, alluding to the damage Karen could inflict. "Folli" sounds Italian. The name as a whole helps construct her as deviant and violent due to the conflation of Italians and social misbehavior and tendencies toward crime.[56] The lack of ethnic and racial diversity in Chippewa causes Italian ancestry to be highly visible when contrasted with generic, unmarked whiteness. Karen's aggressive demeanor also adds to her "otherness," making it probable to read her as non-white or less white than her classmates since she does not conform in appearance or behavior.

In *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses the history of "racial in-betweenness" of Italians in the United states, describing them as occupying a "racial middle ground within the otherwise unforgiving, binary caste system of white-over-black" in segregated areas of the U.S. While Italians were legally white, "socially they represented a problem population at best."[57] Coding Italians exclusively as white posed a dilemma, since they did not appear visually similar to what was historically considered white,[58] nor did they always adhere to "a more abiding brand of social whiteness."[59] Italians have instead been identified by their darker "swarthy" skin, which is

[55] I.e., the racial homogeneity of Chippewa, the all-white cast, and the especially fair complexions, light eyes, and lack of racial signifiers of the majority of Karen's peers.

[56] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 56–62. Jacobson argues race in America is made, not something people are born into. It can also change due to the society and culture of particular eras. Italians in America have been racialized as similar to blacks, but have also been white enough to receive similar social and legal status given to whites.

[57] Jacobson. 293, 35, 57.

[58] Anglo-Saxon or Benjamin Franklin's conception of "lovely white."

[59] Jacobson, 57.

portrayed as linked to criminal tendencies.[60] On screen, they are often depicted as deviant and "sex-crazed."[61] On *Freaks*, Karen's potential ethnic (Italian) and possible racial (mixed) difference is further emphasized by her desirability and sexual availability, traits that are regularly associated with female characters that stand out as racially marked among whites.[62]

By being shown only as emotionally volatile and excessively sexual, Karen is not a fully formed character and has no redeeming qualities. Karen loses her relationship, her friends, and a potential new love interest; she also loses power over the "geeks" when she is bullied and reduced to their level. When Karen makes her final exit from the school's hallway, the implication is that Kim will fight her after school and potentially reunite with Daniel.[63] Kim and Daniel's relationship is tumultuous, but a tumultuous relationship is less disruptive than Daniel being in a relationship with Karen would be, due to Karen's perceived ethnic difference. In this setting, Karen cannot realistically enter a romantic or long-term relationship with Daniel . . . and she doesn't. Instead, she disappears.

Across the many characters Jones has played, her characters' romances with white males have a better chance of succeeding if these characters conform to unmarked whiteness; in contrast, if the characters are racialized or sexualized (as in the case of Karen), the romance may begin, but does not endure. Many of Jones' notable performances are as part of casts that lack racial diversity, making her characters unique among their circles of friends and acquaintances, and also problematic in their conforming to whiteness. Due to *Freaks* being part of Judd

---

[60] Jacobson, 56.

[61] Nadra Kareem Nittle, "Stereotypes of Italian Americans In Film and Television," *AboutNews,* October 15, 2015, accessed October 29, 2015.

[62] See Joseph, *Transcending Blackness,* 33. "The mixed-race African American body is still tied to an imagined, excessive sexuality." See Dagbovie-Mullins, 1. Mixed race has a "sexual allure and curiosity."

[63] Kim and Daniel make up and break up several times throughout the season.

Apatow's wide body of film and TV projects,[64] the lack of racial diversity or innovative ways of introducing and discussing race is not surprising.[65] Elwood Watson writes, "As a producer, Apatow has been faulted for the absence of people of color in his work" and is still known for "unwillingness to embrace diverse casting and diverse themes."[66]

Despite on-screen interracial relationships being more common in Hollywood at the turn of the twenty-first century, when *Freaks* aired, portrayals of relationships outside of the norm were still often short-lived, overly sexual, or comical, or highlighted latent discomfort with romance between races. In *The Color of Love on the Big Screen: The Portrayal of Women in Hollywood Films in Interracial Relationships from 1967-2005*, Nadia Ramoutar discusses the infrequency of interracial relationships in film and their fatalistic depictions that "make the message clear: It's best to stay with your own race unless sex is all you want!"[67] Sociologist, Erica Chito Childs writes, "Television dabbles in interracial unions, yet they rarely materialize, and when they do, the relationship is often impossible" usually because one of the characters, "really belongs with someone else".[68] Sharon Bramlett-Solomon argues that interracial relationships, particularly when compared with white couples, tend to be dating relationships rather than long-lasting partnerships.[69] Such couples often endure obstacles that couples dating

---

[64] Notable films include: *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, *Superbad*, *Knocked Up*, *Bridesmaids*, and *This is 40*. Television shows include: *Girls* and *Love*.

[65] Elwood Watson, "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism," in *HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*, eds. Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc Edward Shaw (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 147.

[66] Watson, 147. He lists Maya Rudolph as the only woman of color to have played a lead role in one of Apatow's films, and because she is racially ambiguous, "Blackness is not obvious to the eye, and her inclusion does little to rebut Apatow's indifference to racial matters."

[67] Nadia A. Ramoutar, "The Color of Love on the Big Screen: The Portrayal of Women in Hollywood Films in Interracial Relationships from 1967-2005" (doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, 2006), 137.

[68] Erica Chita Childs, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 55.

[69] Sharon Bramlett-Solomon, "Interracial Love on Television," in *Critical Thinking about Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media*, eds. Mary-Lou Galican and Debra L. Merskin (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009), 89.

within their race do not experience.[70] Consistent with these patterns, Karen's relationship with Daniel transgressed the norm for television and for Chippewa High and, therefore, did not last.[71]

Karen's visual distinctness, being a transgressor of gender norms, and her sexual promiscuity cause her to stand out from the other characters on *Freaks* and construct her as tragic and deviant. While the show's focus is on students who do not fit into conventional social groups, Karen's deviance is much more significant and is tied to race and gender. While Karen is not given a specific racial identity, she is racialized by having an ethnic-sounding name and being constructed in ways similar to how Italian Americans are unfavorably stereotyped on screen. Karen's sexual behavior contrasts her with the more conventional white female students, and leads to her public humiliation. Karen's inability to have a successful romance keeps race and interracial romance from needing to be discussed. Her character, a racially distinct, overly sexual outsider, is a construction of mixed race as alluring but disruptive and unable to fit into any social group.

In early TV roles, Jones played characters with mixed and black identities; this made her subsequent ambiguous and Italian-coded characters appear to be obscuring her part-black identity. In 2003–2004, Jones was a guest star on comedian Dave Chappelle's *Chappelle's Show*.[72] Her primary character was Pam, whose race is coded by her interactions with Dave and also by common media stereotypes of black women. In the one-minute-and-fifty-second sketch "The Love Contract," Pam and Dave spoof a casual sexual encounter that becomes awkwardly formal in an effort to achieve fully consensual sex that would protect either from a lawsuit. Pam

[70] Bramlett-Solomon, 91. She refers to white couples specifically.

[71] See Childs, 56. "Couples and relationships can still be racialized, even deviantized without even having to mention race." On *Freaks*, this happened to Karen even outside of her interactions with Daniel.

[72] A *Comedy Central* program featuring sketch comedy about race, class, sex, racism, politics, and popular culture.

is coded as black or part-black because her interactions with Dave are meant to be ordinary encounters between a black man and black woman. (Chappelle's non-black interracial encounters over-exaggerate race, whereas here, there are no indications of Pam and Dave's liaison being interracial.)

Chappelle's comedy focuses on parodying blacks and whites as well as black–white relations. Chappelle's "white" characters are highly satirized and made to account for their privilege or obliviousness about race. Conversely, his black characters are the majority and, in a reversal of unmarked white identity, his black characters' races often go unstated. However, black characters are subject to other forms of ridicule, including their socioeconomic class and stereotyped criminality. Referred to by John Strausbaugh as an "all purpose and polyethnic offender,"[73] Chappelle's mockery leaves no one unscathed.

Being romantically partnered with Chappelle with an unstated race codes Pam as the norm, which, for the show, is black. As Pam and Dave negotiate a lengthy contract that will allow their sexual encounter to be truly consensual, Pam's sexual proclivities are revealed; her eager attitude towards casual sex represents a feminist perspective of a woman being able to freely engage in and enjoy sex. Pam's approach to sex could be viewed as problematic, since it reiterates media stereotypes of black women being overly sexual and promiscuous.[74] Yet, because *Chappelle's Show* caters to a younger and racially diverse audience, Pam projects positive, liberated female sexuality, rather than the negative reflection of African American women that mainstream media tends to project.[75]

---

[73] John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Tarcher, 2007), 19.

[74] See Collins, 27. Black women are commonly "associated with an animalistic, 'wild' sexuality."

[75] Kimberly A. Yates, "When 'Keeping it Real' Goes Right," in *The Comedy of Dave Chappelle: Critical Essays,* ed. K.A. Wisniewski (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, INC., 2009), 142, ebook.

As Pam, Jones is part of a primarily black ensemble cast, and there are no speculations as to her racial identity. Similar to her appearance as Karen Scarfolli on *Freaks*, Pam is a guest role that Jones took while she was not yet featured in roles where her race was coded as white or erased. Neither *Freaks* nor *Chappelle's* had the success or longevity of *The Office*.[76] Thus, neither featured Jones in a complex role where race might significantly inform her identity. Further, while sexualized on all three shows, only as Karen Filipelli is Jones shown in a romantic relationship with a lead white male. Thus, on *The Office*, the attempts at erasing a non-white identity and imposing an Italian American one instead make the racial passing difficult to ignore and contrary to the post-racial era in which the show takes place.

Racial Uncertainty on *The Office*

NBC's multi-Emmy-Award-winning show *The Office* (2005–2013) pokes fun at the notion of political correctness around the issue of race and at persistent fascination with and confusion about those lacking easily recognizable racial identity through Jones' character, Karen Filipelli. The unease that some of Karen's coworkers and boss at Dunder Mifflin in Scranton, Pennsylvania, express when they do not know how to categorize her mocks the discomfort that racial ambiguity can produce in others. Despite mainstream media being saturated with images of mixed race, Lisa Nakamura argues that "racial ambiguity demands articulation and clarification by viewers."[77] By the end of her first day in the Scranton office, Karen's background has been up for debate and ultimately coded by her coworkers as Italian American.

Chappelle is known for making "generational references . . . noting that most of the members of the audience are his age."

[76] *Freaks* was initially canceled mid-season, and *Chappelle*'s was canceled in the middle of its third season.

[77] Lisa Nakamura, "Mixedfolks.com: 'Ethnic Ambiguity,' Celebrity Outing, and the Internet," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 71.

As a mockumentary, *The Office* mocks a small-town paper supply company trying to survive in the twenty-first century using pre-Internet technology and unable to adapt to politically correct behavior, especially involving sensitive matters such as race and sexuality. The show is infused with tension-filled humor that is derived from the stiff character interactions and the voyeuristic effect of the filming. In, "The Mocking Mockumentary and the Ethics of Irony," Miranda Campbell defines the genre as born out of the "proliferation of available archival footage since the 1950s."[78] It utilizes documentary camera work such as "grainy footage" and "hand-held camera footage," and relies on irony to spoof documentary filmmaking.[79] Mockumentaries also adhere to a common use of satire "either in the parody of the form of the documentary or in the satirical treatment or critique of an issue."[80]

Watching the white male staff of Dunder Mifflin speculate on Karen's racial background is uncomfortable and simultaneously funny because it is blown up for comedic effect and, as is the norm in mockumentaries, the audience is aware of the joke.[81] The writers of *The Office* use heavy satire to address present-day racial issues that are sensitive and difficult to navigate. They mock these interactions to hint at their own—and mainstream society's—awkwardness in dealing with questions about racial identity, especially when addressing a person whose race is not easily discernible.[82]

---

[78] Miranda Campbell, "The Mocking Mockumentary and the Ethics of Irony," *The Journal of Culture and Education Taboo* 11, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 52.

[79] Campbell, 53.

[80] Ibid., 53.

[81] The audience expects the characters to behave awkwardly and inappropriately and to deal with sensitive issues in the exact opposite way that a conventional office would. See Jane Roscoe and Craig Higt, *Faking it: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), for discussion of the critique and hoax aspects of mockumentaries.

[82] See Ben Nukols, "Hysterical Silence: Rashida Jones and Race in the Movies," *Illinformedgadfly*, March 19, 2009, accessed June 14, 2010.

Karen is the only Dunder Mifflin employee whose race is questioned by others because of its ambiguity. Scranton employees are used to racial differences being easy to discern or made public by the employee sharing about his or her background. Michele Elam's argument that "the visual fetishizing of race, the assumption that race, even mixed race, is always optically available and decipherable" is applicable here;[83] since Karen's identity is a mystery, her ambiguity makes her coworkers wary. Karen's boss, Michael Scott (Steve Carell), and coworkers, Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson) and Jim Halpert (John Krasinski), make humorous and awkward remarks regarding her potential origins or interracial parents, causing Karen noticeable discomfort. Each man is uneasy with not knowing Karen's race. Additionally, their desire to categorize Karen rather than accept her ambiguity mirrors their outdated technology and insulated, small town mindset; all contrast with twenty-first-century norms.

On *The Office*, Karen's ambiguous ethnic and racial background inspires jokes and confusion among some of the white employees.[84] Michael and Dwight's initial guesses about—and discomfort with—Karen's ethnic and racial background begin before she even arrives at Dunder Mifflin. In Season Three, Episode Eight, "The Merger," Dwight hands Michael a nametag and reads, "Karen Filipelli," in a flat voice. Michael begins to read the nametag in his regular voice, then switches to an Italian accent, drawing out her name and attempting to classify her as Italian. Proud of himself, he smiles up at the camera, but shows no further interest in her name or background. The camera shifts focus to Dwight as he says, "Probably Italian, possibly Filipina."[85] As he says "possibly Filipina," the camera picks up unease on his face and a note of

[83] See Michelle Elam, *The Souls of Mixed Folks: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 99. Race is assumed to be visually readable and understood.

[84] The Stamford, Connecticut branch has closed and its employees are relocated to Scranton. Dunder Mifflin locations outside of Scranton are all run with more professionalism.

[85] *The Office*.

suspicion in his voice.[86] Though she has not yet arrived, there is already curiosity around Karen's background because her surname is not easily identifiable and indicates a potential ethnic or racial difference.

Karen's initial interactions at Dunder Mifflin highlight how her ambiguity will be disruptive until it is rationalized, and how her presence in general, as an attractive female employee, will cause tension. Almost immediately, there are also implications that Karen's working in Scranton will lead to conflict with the main female character, receptionist, Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer). During Karen's first conversation with Pam, the camera cuts back and forth between the two women's faces for a series of close-ups, providing a contrast between the very fair-skinned Pam and the darker-skinned Karen—thus racially and ethnically coding different versions of femininity. While they are extremely warm and friendly to one another, each woman is unaware (but the audience knows) that the other is interested in Jim. Pam has eagerly awaited his return to Scranton from the Stamford office. Karen, on the other hand, is oblivious to Pam and Jim's history[87] and, unbeknownst to Pam, Karen and Jim are interested in each other.[88]

As Michael walks toward the front desk, his face reveals that he is caught off-guard by the sight of Karen. Quickly gaining his composure, Michael shakes Karen's hand with Pam looking on. He remarks, "Wow, you're very exotic looking. Was your dad a G.I.?"[89] The camera

[86] While no evidence has been found that Karen Filipelli was meant to be a Filipina character, deeming her potentially Filipina is a way for Dwight to racialize, exoticize, and label her as "other."

[87] Despite being in a relationship with her high school sweetheart, Roy, the two had crushes on each other since Jim began working in Scranton. Though Pam showed feelings for Jim, she turned him down, causing Jim to relocate to Stamford to get over her. The two were also each other's best friend at Dunder Mifflin.

[88] Karen and Jim begin dating in the following episode, "The Convict." However, Jim is not ready to disclose their new status to anyone at Dunder Mifflin due to his previous feelings for Pam.

[89] *The Office.* Michael's remarks are an inappropriate and degrading reference to Karen's possible background as the child of a white male solider and foreign-born Asian woman, a common question asked of racially mixed Asians. Calling Karen Filipelli exoticizes, racializes, and sexualizes her.

immediately cuts to a medium shot of Karen, then focuses in on her look of unease. Karen remains quiet as the camera closes in on just her emotionless face and blinking eyes, until she finally looks away. The whirring of the office printers and copiers, previously drowned out by the banter, are now perceptible since the conversation ended in dead silence. After a final close-up of Karen's uncomfortable expression, the camera returns to Pam and briefly catches her giving Michael a look of strong disapproval for his inappropriate behavior.

While *The Office* spoofs small towns in America that lack diversity, the show also satirizes how progressives can go too far with expectations of political correctness. Due to Michael's lifelong residency in the racially homogenous town of Scranton, and as a result of his trying not to "see" race or appear racist, he unwittingly ends up making comments that have racist undertones. Such expressions reflect an outdated way of thinking that comes across as painfully funny when compared with twenty-first-century politically correct standards of office behavior. Michael symbolizes a clueless and racially privileged white American male; his own race is never questioned, and therefore he has trouble with discussions of race.[90] He is blind to his verbal blunders, which are inappropriate for an employer; he repeatedly embarrasses himself while his employees squirm or laugh uneasily.

Michael and Dwight's confusion about Karen's racial and ethnic identities highlight their understanding of race as fixed and visually obvious. They easily classify other non-white employees by race by observing visual clues, identifying cultural signifiers, and asking intrusive questions:[91] Kelly Kapoor is Indian American, Daryl Philbin is African American, and Oscar

[90] See USC Annenberg School for Communication. "Whiteness is understood to be invisible, because it is constructed as dominant. If you are white, you occupy a position of privilege. You hold a distinct advantage over others, even if you didn't work for it or aspire to it, can't see it, won't see it, or have been taught not to see it."

[91] In Season One, Episode Two, "Diversity Day," Michael passes out cards with different ethnicities and races on them. Each person must wear a card on their forehead and are given clues, based on stereotypes (which Michael believes are true), in order to guess the word on the card.

Martinez is Mexican American. Michael and Dwight ascribe solely racial and highly stereotypical meanings to their behavior. As inappropriate as their comments are, they do not derive from confusion about their identities; none of them are ambiguous. Michael and Dwight's over the top responses to Karen's ambiguity fit the over exaggeration aspect of mockumentaries, and are similar to the persistent unease with racially mixed individuals.[92]

Karen symbolizes how a racially ambiguous woman can cause conflicting feelings of discomfort and desire in white men. The way Karen is racially marked and sexualized means her "mixed-race female body is unquestionably outside of true womanhood, which is coded as white."[93] Karen cannot enjoy the invisibility that white employees are permitted; their race is never cause for suspicion. To quell his disorientation, Michael relies on his knowledge of stereotypes of mixed race being illicit. He attempts to make sense of her non-conventional appearance by racially placing Karen into familiar narratives of prostitution, war brides, and children born out of wedlock who wear their parents' forbidden love on their skin.[94]

Michael's reaction to Karen's attractive and ambiguous appearance helps affirm Dwight's initial identification of her as "possibly Filipina," or deviating from normative white. Both Michael and Dwight's racial classification of Karen give them power over her as they set the stage for how others might receive her and for Michael's subsequent unseemly references to her beauty and body that stem from her perceived racial difference.

---

[92] Childs, 40. Several prime time television shows barely open the door to interracial relationships and mixed race characters (primarily children), but they are quickly dismissed, ineptly dealt with, or focus on difficulties rather than presenting an ordinary relationship. Viewers only see recycled and negative stereotypes.

[93] Joseph, 15.

[94] Critical race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant and mixed race scholar Maria P.P. Root state that evidence of racial mixing is disconcerting to many people. Discomfort with ambiguity leads to using visual clues to try to decipher racial backgrounds.

Karen's disturbed facial response to Michael's question about her dad being a G.I. emphasizes her confusion, but her silence means her race remains unknown. Whereas Michael thinks Karen might be mixed-race, Filipina, or Italian, African American—which many viewers of the show know is part of Jones' own heritage—is not mentioned as a possibility. Emphasizing Karen's ambiguity acknowledges that she is racially distinct, but omitting a specific racial background also covers the possibility of her being African American. By distancing Karen from that ancestry, she is able to date white coworker, Jim without the relationship being interracial.

The satiric nature of *The Office* is expressed in Michael's strong need to confirm Karen's racial background and its continual elusiveness, despite Jones' appearance occurring at the height of celebrations and public conversations of mixed race. Beltrán and Fojas write, "Not only has multiraciality, or, in today's vernacular, being 'mixed,' taken on new meaning in U.S. popular culture, but biracial and multiracial models, actors, and film and television characters seem to be everywhere."[95] Senna called the era, the "mulatto millennium,"[96] and the MAVIN foundation created the term "Generation Mix."[97] Beltrán and Fojas remarked, "Mixed race actors are also increasingly likely to foreground their mixed ethnic background as an element in their publicity today, a sign that biraciality and multiraciality are taking on new meanings."[98] In this era, Jones and Karen could "come out" as mixed race since.[99] However, it appeared that Karen might not simply symbolize the fascination and confusion that mixed individuals can cause, but she might also symbolize fractures in the post-racial ideology that claim race no longer matters.

---

[95] Beltrán and Fojas, 1.

[96] Danzy Senna, "The Mulatto Millennium," in *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*, ed. Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 12–27, quoted in Beltrán and Fojas, 1.

[97] Beltrán and Fojas, 1. "The MAVIN foundation is a nonprofit organization that advocates for mixed race individuals and families and aims to raise awareness of racial identity issues."

[98] Ibid., 2. The authors include, Jessica Alba, Jennifer Beals, Keanu Reeves, Halle Berry, and Vin Diesel among the list of celebrities who were identifying publicly as mixed-race in the late 1990s–early 2000s.

[99] Ibid., 1. The authors use this phrase to refer to celebrities making their multiple ancestries public.

Speculations about the origins of Karen's last name are attempts to racially classify her, since visually she cannot be placed into a singular racial category. The expectation of race having distinguishable corporeal traits means an unidentifiable background like Karen's causes disorientation.[100] Aside from speculation about the origins of her last name, Karen's background remains unconfirmed on the show.

Similar to many on screen interracial romances,[101] Karen Filipelli's romance with Jim is problematic and short-lived.[102] Karen and Jim date, but Jim hesitates to reveal their status as a couple and is uncomfortable when Karen attempts to rent a house on his street.[103] Jim's lingering feelings for Pam, combined with Karen's insecurity, force the relationship into a downward spiral.[104] Only two episodes after Karen and Jim argue about how geographically close they should live to one another, Karen finds out about Jim's crush on Pam.[105] After confronting him,[106] Karen becomes jealous, going out of her way to be affectionate with him in front of Pam.[107] In a confessional, she reveals her true feelings, calling Pam, "kind of a bitch."[108] Karen and Pam cease to be friendly, and Karen and Jim never repair their relationship.

After losing Jim to Pam, Karen makes a swift exit from Scranton and becomes pregnant relatively quickly, causing her to appear sad and promiscuous, thus in line with previous on-

---

[100] See Omi and Winant, 247. "Racialization involved promotion of certain corporeal characteristics." We "other" people by emphasizing "immediately visible corporeal characteristics."

[101] Including Karen Scarfolli's (*Freaks*).

[102] Ramoutar, 135–36. Ramoutar's research of top-grossing Hollywood films from 1967–2005 revealed interracial relationships, "in addition to being troublesome . . . are also brief and based on quick sexual exchanges rather than meaningful long term relationships. The overall portrayal of the interracial relationship as being short, sexual, and stormy."

[103] Season three, episode 11, "Back from Vacation."

[104] Season three, episode 23, "The Job."

[105] Season three, episode 13, "Traveling Salesmen."

[106] Season three, episode 14, "The Return."

[107] Season three, episode 15, "Ben Franklin."

[108] Season three, episode 22, "Beach Games."

screen constructions of mixed-race women.[109] When Michael sees her again, only months later, she is in the last stages of pregnancy, causing speculation about the illegitimacy of her child-to-be.[110] By never confirming an identity and remaining silent yet frustrated regarding questions and statements made about her appearance and perceived race, Karen is ambiguous for her full run on *The Office*.

Despite Karen's ambiguity, her partial coding as Italian American, like Karen Scarfolli on *Freaks*, means she is constructed according to some stereotypes of Italian Americans that differentiate them from normative white, but do not stray too far from recognizable European ancestry. Casting Jones, an "out" mixed-race performer, as part of a racially diverse cast, and then coding her character as presumably Italian American, awkwardly covers Jones' African American ancestry. Jones is the only cast member who plays a character of different race from her own. She is neither generic, normative white—due to her surmised Italian identity being highlighted—nor is she like the other racially distinct employees who neatly fit Michael's inept understandings of race.[111] To ensure Karen's identity does not become even more confusing, Jones' first name, which is Arabic, is not used as her character's name despite many of the secondary or short-term characters going by the same name as the actors portraying them.[112] (For example, Angela Kinsey plays Angela Martin, Oscar Martinez plays Oscar Nunez, Phyllis Smith plays Phyllis Lapin-Vance, and Creed Bratton does not use a different character surname.) In

[109] Beltrán and Fojas, 1. Until recently, "individuals of mixed racial descent either were not visible or were constructed negatively as tragic and/or villainous figures in cinema and other media.

[110] Season five, episode 16, "Lecture Circuit Part 1." Karen appears in Season four, episode 1, "The Job, Part 2," but does not have any lines.

[111] White ethnicity is unspecified or casually referred to, i.e., Dwight Schrute makes references to having German, Amish, and Dutch ancestry. He is the only white character closely tied to a European ethnic background.

[112] The majority of the main characters (Steve Carell and John Krasinski in particular) are well known for starring in Hollywood films. Using their real names would be confusing to the audience, or would make their characters on *The Office* seem less believable.

Jones' case, the writers covered signifiers of race and ethnicity by giving Karen a common American first name and a surname that lends itself to an Italian identity—an identity that her coworkers found humor in continually reaffirming.

The teasing Karen receives for being Italian highlights the politically incorrect manner in which the Scranton office is run. Since Michael and Dwight cannot leave noticeable differences alone, Jim makes fun of them by being overly concerned about Karen paying tribute to her Italian roots when she records her voice mail message.[113] This scene also does the work of having Karen acknowledge an Italian ethnicity by not attempting to deny that her last name is Italian. Thinking she is alone at her desk, Karen picks up her phone receiver from its cradle, and the camera focuses in until only her head and shoulders are in the frame. After she records, "This is Karen Filipelli. Please leave a message," but before she can return the receiver to its cradle, the camera catches Jim's voice off screen saying, "Terrible. Totally unconvincing."[114] The hand-held camera now quickly moves back and forth between Jim and Karen; the voyeuristic aspect of the show is obvious here as the audience is brought into this interchange, of which the rest of the staff is not aware. The camera again focuses on Karen at her desk on her second attempt to record a message. In almost exactly the same tone, Karen repeats her outgoing message. The camera now awkwardly moves up to catch Jim's response as he stands over Karen's desk and remarks with a very slight smile and a hint of mischief, "Not bad but you are Italian. Try it more Italian."[115] Mildly amused, Karen plays along and this time records the message using a heavy Italian accent. When she is done, as she looks up at Jim, she over-exaggerates her smile, and the

[113] Earlier in the episode, Michael equated Martin Nash with a slave because he is black, but realized his faux pas and became slightly uncomfortable. Later, he told Kelly Kapoor to pretend bagels and cream cheese were meat so she would not eat them, assuming that because she is Indian, she is a vegetarian. He did not appear embarrassed to make this public assertion.

[114] *The Office*.

[115] Ibid.

camera pans out to reveal that Stanley Hudson was sitting across from Karen during this whole exchange, and from the mis-en-scene, it appears that Karen's new desk is surrounded by stacks of files and binders, as well as a large blue plastic bin filled with toys including plastic cars, a Chihuahua figurine, and a stuffed animal, emphasizing the unprofessional nature of the Scranton office.[116] Jim asks if she "feels good," and when she nods, he smiles and walks off.[117] The camera then reverts back to Karen, catches Stanley still at work and oblivious to her, and this time closes in on Karen until she is only shown from the chest up and appears quite small amid the mess surrounding her. Here, Karen is confirmed as white, though her Italian surname still differentiates her from the more homogenous officemates.[118] In the present, Italian American characters can be collapsed into generic whiteness, or can have stereotypes of their race exaggerated as discussed above. However, Scranton office workers are so insulated and removed from racial and cultural diversity that any minor ethnic difference can cause them an anxious response.

Though interracial relationships take place between Dunder Mifflin coworkers, because Jim is the most desired white male in the office, his romantic relationships are more scrutinized than others.[119] Before Jim and Karen begin dating, Jim only dates or expresses attraction to white women.[120] Therefore, Jim's willingness to date Karen is more realistic if Karen is also white.

---

[116] When other branches of Dunder-Mifflin are featured, their offices are much less cluttered, and have a sleeker look. The employees also take themselves more seriously.

[117] Jim gives Karen a hard time because he enjoys teasing and playing pranks on his officemates. However, because of the previous questioning regarding Karen's ethnicity, Jim's repeating of Karen's Italian ethnicity can be viewed as reaffirming her ethnicity.

[118] The majority of white members of Dunder Mifflin are neither ethnically identified, nor do they have traits that ethnically mark them. This may be due to the show being an American version of the original British show. If a character does assert an ethnic affiliation, it is often voluntary and does not automatically work to rewrite the character as identified primarily by his or her ethnicity.

[119] For example, Indian American Kelly Kapoor dates white and black coworkers, Ryan Howard and Daryl Philbin, respectively.

[120] Katie, the "purse girl," played by Amy Adams, and Pam, the receptionist, respectively.

Due to historical and present-day relations between white men and black women in the United States, such couples exist in very low numbers (117,000 white male-black female marriages in the United States in 2006),[121] and such representations are not often shown on screen, especially as the focus of a TV show or film. Beltrán argues that this type of "casting paradigm . . . can be seen as holdover from classical Hollywood's reluctance to portray mixed race couples on screen."[122] Relationships such as Karen and Jim's, if Karen is non-white, often have a common formula. Childs writes that they, "are almost exclusively depicted as comical misadventures, play on perception of difference for shock value," or end up reaffirming "that racially matched characters are the norm."[123] Karen and Jim's short-lived relationship mirrors all three of these tropes.[124]

The abrupt ending of Karen's relationship with Jim, her immediate exit from Scranton (and the show, for a season and a half), and Jim's choice of Pam over her depict Karen as the wrong partner for Jim—potentially portraying a white woman as a better partner for a white man than a non-white woman. Though Karen and Jim's romance was only a few months long, when the two interview at the corporate office in New York City, Karen believes if one of them gets the job, they will both move. She is in for a surprise, however; Jim quickly decides he no longer wants a corporate job or Karen, and rushes back to Scranton to ask Pam out.[125] The demise of

---

[121] U.S. Census Bureau.

[122] Beltrán, "Mixed Race in Latinowood," 260.

[123] Childs, 41.

[124] *Guess Who?*, starring Bernie Mac, Ashton Kutcher, and Zoe Saldana, a modern comedy based off of the 1960s film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, displayed both the difficulties and humor involved in white male-black female relationships. *Something New* stars Sanae Lathan as an African American woman who tries "something new" dating a white man.

[125] It is briefly mentioned in the next episode that Karen left Scranton for good. She reappears as the branch manager of the Utica office in Season five, episode 16, "Lecture Circuit Part 1." Though it was never entirely clear why Karen's part was so drastically cut, outside of *The Office*, Jones had been working on *Parks and Recreation* where she had a lead role as Ann Perkins. In an interview with Kam Williams, Jones indicated she would not likely return to *The Office*: "I'm playing a different character, and those shows are scheduled to come on back-to-back."

Karen and Jim's relationship implies that Karen was unable to fulfill him the way he believed Pam would. Karen Filipelli, like Karen Scarfolli from *Freaks,* and many other mixed-race love interests, is almost immediately forgotten so that the white male protagonist can have a chance at a better-matched or "appropriate" relationship with a white woman.[126]

In addition to the portrayal of her on-screen romance, Karen is also coded as non-white by stereotypes of women of color that differentiate them from white women and exoticize their bodies. In Season Three, Episode 22, "Women's Appreciation," Michael refers to her body to comment on her attractiveness. When middle-aged and obese Phyllis is flashed in the parking lot, Michael is more concerned with the motives of the perpetrator than with Phyllis' trauma. He cannot hide his surprise or laughter, wondering out loud, "Did he see Pam, or Karen from behind?"[127] Michael implies that Pam is attractive, and Karen might not be conventionally pretty, but is desirable since she is endowed with the physical feature often used to sexualize African American and Latina women. Again, Michael has committed a faux pas in Scranton, which would amount to sexual harassment anywhere else. He deems Karen appealing because her of "exotic" looks and physique, which distinguish her from the other women in Scranton whose attractiveness is not tied to their ethnic or racial backgrounds.[128] In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism,* Patricia Hill Collins argues that the

[126] Childs, 39. "Hesitancy to delve into interracial relationships for any more than a few episodes can be read as part of the representations of interracial couples as deviant or outside the norm, thereby rendering it unshowable."

[127] *The Office*.

[128] See Dagbovie, 231. Singer and actress Mariah Carey, who is also mixed-race (black, Venezuelan, and Irish), has been regarded as "exotic" as a means of making sense of her unconventional appearance. Playing herself in the film, *Glitter*, Carey's employer, a music video director, attempts to articulate her race: "She's not black, she is not white, she is exotic, OK?" Dagbovie argues categorizing mixed race as exotic works to substantiate Mariah Carey's "racialized sexuality."

"association of sexuality with Black women helps create ideas about racial difference."[129] Collins uses white reactions to black women's bodies to discuss the sexualizing of racial difference. For example, people worldwide have been fascinated with Puerto Rican[130] celebrity Jennifer Lopez's behind.[131] "Karen from behind" is Michael's crude way of appreciating Karen's body in a way that differentiates and sexualizes her.[132] Since larger behinds are commonly racialized as African American or Latina, Karen's ambiguity is again brought into the discussion and racialized as non-white.

Almost White in *I Love You, Man*

In an interview with Janice Page of the *Boston Globe*, Jones shared a casting call for a "Rashida Jones type," confirmation that not only is the actress in demand, but that her physicality and look are, as well.[133] In effect, early twenty-first-century preference for ethnic ambiguity contributed to Jones (and actresses with similar appearances) being desired precisely

[129] Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 27. Collins capitalizes "Black" when she refers to race or a racial group. "Following conventions in the 2000 U.S. census, I capitalize the term *Black* when it serves to name a racial population group with an identifiable history in the United States . . . the term *Black* is simultaneously a racial identity assigned to people of African descent by the state, a political identity for petitioning that same state, and a self-defined ethnic identity" (17).

[130] Race scholars have constructed Latinos as "legally white but socially black" (Chon Noriega qtd. in Beltrán) and "already mixed race and as such have at times become trendy in the midst of the vogue for the multiracial figure" (Leo Jiménez qtd. in Beltrán).

[131] Collins, 25. "News of J-Lo is everywhere. . . . One special feature of Lopez's routinely makes the news—her seemingly large bottom. From late night American talk shows to South African radio programs to Internet websites, J-Lo's butt is all the rage."

[132] It is also the writers' way of poking fun at society for being wrapped up in the big behind fetish.

[133] Janice Page, "Rashida Jones, Child of Hollywood, Comes into Her Own," *Boston Globe*. Boston Globe, August 11, 2012, accessed November 10, 2015, https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2012/08/11/rashida-jones-child-hollywood-comes-into-her-own/C2Pi6t8T7D06E4NAGiHI7K/story.html. Jones is aware that multiracial actresses are more accepted and in demand. She lists Jessica Alba, Jennifer Lopez, Halle Berry, and Eva Mendes as examples. Only Berry is part-black, the other three are Latina or mixed Latina, and Alba has been used as a symbol of ethnic ambiguity.

because she does not conform to a singular look.[134] Beltrán and Fojas write, "In contrast to the eras of only tragic and shameful *mestizaje*, such figures have been represented alternately as 'neutral, ordinary, positive, or even heroic'" providing more opportunities for those with a multiracial or ambiguous appearances.[135] Rebecca Walker writes, "It's more than cool to be mixed, it's downright relevant." [136]

In playing the character of Zooey Rice in Hollywood's Blockbuster comedy *I Love You, Man*, Jones' ambiguous appearance is part of the reason she can, albeit awkwardly, fit in with an all-white cast. However, despite being the lead female, Zooey is a flat character. She has only a partial identity that is often informed by outdated tropes.[137] The clumsy attempts at erasing signifiers of Zooey's background that hint at particular ethnic or racial ancestry result in an unfinished quality about her character. She exists without a past or familial ties, reducing her to being significant only because of her romantic relationship.

I Love You, Man is a slapstick comedy devoid of discussions of race or racial diversity despite Jones playing the lead female. The film is centered on Peter Klaven (Paul Rudd) a straight white man in a happy relationship with Zooey, but lacking a male friendship that Sydney Fife (Jason Segal) will come to provide. Until Peter and Zooey prepare for their upcoming nuptials, neither realized that while close to his family and female co-workers, Peter has no close male friends. After proposing to Zooey, Peter realizes being an amazing boyfriend is not enough;

---

[134] See La Ferla, Guterl, Beltrán, and Senna, mentioned above.

[135] Beltrán and Fojas, 10.

[136] Rebecca Walker, "Introduction," in *An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience*, ed. Chandra Prasad (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 14.

[137] In many interviews centering on her role in *I Love You, Man*, the race of Jones' character, Zooey Rice, was not mentioned. Several film reviews did not discuss Jones' part in the film, or only included a one-line acknowledgment of her role as the lead character's girlfriend. Following the release of *I Love You, Man*, reviews from the following major film publications do not mention Jones' perceived race and barely discuss her role in the film: *The New York Times*, *AV Club*, *RogertEbert.com*, *The Guardian*, and *Slate*.

he needs a close male friend in order to have a best man for his wedding and to assuage Zooey's and her friends' worries about his social inadequacies.

Zooey is constructed as a tragic figure by her orphan status and lack of full personhood. Being denied a racial and cultural identity, and family, means racial issues are not a part of the narrative. While Peter has a close family to give him a backstory, Zooey has no family beyond her white girlfriends. In fact, the first time Zooey's family is mentioned is halfway into the film, when Peter explains to Sydney that he cannot give him a loan because "Zooey's dad is out of the picture and we're paying for the wedding ourselves."[138] Hailey and Denise are two of the only three people she calls after getting engaged, and they are her only invitees at the engagement dinner. Thus, Zooey's best friends are her surrogate family until Peter can give her real family ties. A white husband compensating for blood relatives valorizes whiteness over racial diversity that would have comprised Zooey's family.

In addition to portraying her as a tragic figure, Zooey's lack of family helps to obscure her racial identity. Physically, Zooey lacks any signifiers or traits of non-white identity, save for her light brown skin, and so her orphan status and surname further enforce her white coding. Showing parents or family members would hint at, or confirm, Zooey's multiracial or non-white identity. For instance, alongside an entirely white or black family, Zooey's dissimilarity would be highlighted. Inclusion in an all-black family could differentiate her too much from her friends and Peter. An interracial or multiracial family would reveal black–white sexual relations and lead to discussions about race that the film instead avoided. Instead, without family, and covering all characteristics that set her apart from unmarked whiteness, Zooey can be interpreted as white.

[138] *I Love You, Man.*

Jones' ambiguity helps her in roles where racial identity is deemphasized, and playing a character like Zooey shows mixed race in its most neutral construction. Such portrayals, as Dagbovie explains, are representative of "America's desired 'other': multiracial, de-politicized, and lacking any serious racial allegiance," and "presents no controversy and gives no reminders of black/white miscegenation."[139] As with other mixed-race performers who have "racially uncertain physical characteristics,"[140] Jones' choice to avoid drawing too heavily from any specific racial ancestry means she can be viewed as "a movie star virtually every demographic can claim as its own."[141] If audiences are not aware of Jones' own interracial family, Zooey's coding as white can successfully exclude race from the film.

Zooey's racial covering is most apparent during the wedding ceremony, because she does not have any family present. While the minister and a few guests scattered in the crowd are black, there is no indication that they are related to Zooey. Her bridesmaids are all white, save for one that appears Asian, and there is only one close-up shot of the group. Peter's fencing acquaintance, Eugene, played by South Asian American actor Aziz Ansari, is part of the wedding scene but does not have a speaking role. Finally, in the film's most glaring attempt to erase Zooey's race, since no family members exist to walk Zooey down the aisle, she is "given away" to Peter by Hailey and Denise. As Johann Pachelbel's *Canon in D Major* plays, Zooey's two best friends walk her down the aisle of the Santa Barbara beachfront venue. As the camera pans out to capture the guests, it reveals primarily white friends and family members. As the trio gets closer to where the minister and wedding party await, a few black guests can be seen in the

[139] Dagbovie, 225. Actor Vin Diesel's race can be modified to fit different character constructions. Analyses of Diesel easily apply to both Jones, as a mixed-race actress, and her character Zooey, whose lack of racial designation is problematic because she falls into loose tragic tropes.

[140] Ibid., 226.

[141] Ibid. Reference to Diesel that can also be applied to the way audiences view Jones.

crowd,[142] but the camera's focus is blurred, and those that are given close-ups are white attendees such as Denise's husband, Barry, and Peter's mom.

Zooey Rice is not a post-racial character, but a problematic, ambiguous character. To play Zooey, Jones' identity is covered; she appears to be racially passing. Erasing all races but white from the film results in privileging whiteness.[143] Nothing in Zooey's lifestyle or personality expresses an identity other than her unmarked white ethnicity and middle-class status. Zooey is comfortable in spaces where the demographics are almost exclusively white. She lives in a white, middle class community in Los Angeles, plays golf, has only white co-workers, and spends time with Peter and his family. Her personality is primarily comprised of what she provides for Peter and her friends. Yet, understanding Zooey as white is problematic. Race and racial issues are erased in order to pull this off. Despite the director's attempt to not deal with race, Zooey's race does not disappear; on the contrary, it becomes almost impossible to ignore. Jones is playing an underdeveloped character whose lack of cultural and ethnic identity, family, and history constructs her as white. Childs writes that attempts at colorblindness can actually work to "reproduce our long-standing notions about the deviant nature of interracial sex and the locations of these relationships in the margins of society," and race "in its deliberate denial it can be ever more present."[144] Zooey's neutral identity, which does not introduce any blackness, is

---

[142] See Thomas Gorton, "Hollywood Doesn't Give People of Colour Many Lines," *Dazed*, July 2015, accessed June 1, 2016, http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/25281/1/hollywood-doesnt-give-people-of-colour-many-lines. On the lack of people of color with speaking roles in Hollywood, filmmaker Dylan Marron says, "The deeper I dive and the more films I edit, I realise there's a pattern. People of colour either don't speak or they are relegated to such peripheral roles that are often not even credited with names." See Dylan Marron, *Every Single Word Spoken by a Person of Color in "(500) Days of Summer," YouTube,* June 19 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkXf5IwVmXw. This film is 30 seconds long. Marron has several other very short films comprised of only lines spoken by actors of color.

[143] See Ben Nukols. "Audiences are comfortable enough with interracial romance that Jones can secure the leading female role… Progress right? Not, exactly. I realize this is a loaded phrase, and I don't mean to inflame (or do I?), but Jones might as well be 'passing for white.'" See also "Hysterical Silence: Rashida Jones and Race in the Movies." *Take Two Movie Review*. Mar 19, 2009 accessed June 7, 2016.

[144] Childs, 56.

analogous to Joseph's definition of "Whiteness, imaged as pure, invisible, and promise-laden . . . the savior for multiracial African American figures from blackness, presented as sullied, hyper visible, and tragedy filled."[145] A white social world, a new white family, and an absence of black family or black culture all help to erase Zooey's race.

Unlike ambiguous characters such as Karen Scarfolli and Karen Filipelli who are burdened due to not fitting into particular social groups, Zooey is not singled out as being deviant. Significantly, she does not suffer the unfortunate outcome of losing her love interest to another woman. Zooey does she have characteristics that differentiate her from her white peers. Her lack of a racial identity means there are no racial issues to complicate her becoming part of Peter's family. Her relationship with Peter endures, and the film ends with their marriage. Zooey becomes part of a white family, deepening her connections to a white social world and identity, and valorizing whiteness at the expense of her own racial identity.

Superior Ethnic Ambiguity on *Parks and Recreation*.

As Ann Perkins on NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), Jones played a character primarily coded as white but known for her ambiguous and hybrid background; however, her particular ethnic or racial affiliations were never revealed.[146] *Parks* was created by two of the writers of *The Office*, Greg Daniels and Michael Schur.[147] *Parks* uses similar satire and mockumentary styles that give both shows their awkward and uncomfortable humor. The show stars Amy Poehler as Leslie Knope, Deputy Park Director of the fictional town of Pawnee,

[145] Joseph, 4.

[146] Dagbovie-Mullins in *Crossing Black* provides the only inference that Ann Perkins is meant to be Italian.

[147] Natalie Abrams, "Rashida Jones: Parks and Recreation is not *The Office*," *TVGuide*, October 7, 2009, accessed March 17, 2016, http://www.tvguide.com/g00/news/jones-parks-office-1010620/?i10c.referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F. Since the shows overlapped, and Jones was on both, there was no crossing over between shows to keep the realistic element of both.

Indiana. Leslie adores her small town, has devoted her life to public service, and has aspirations for being the first female President. Ann Perkins is a nurse who gets involved in local government when she asks the Pawnee Parks Department to fill in a huge pit in front of her house. Leslie and Ann become mismatched but charming best friends. For most of the show's run, these two have the primary female roles.[148]

Compared to Karen Filipelli whose appearance, unstated background, and attractiveness caused discomfort, Ann Perkins' ambiguity is not speculated on, and no specific ethnicity or race is used to identify her. Ann is one of a handful of main characters and undergoes significant life changes as the show progresses, yet, her racial identity does not impact her life, even in the conservative town of Pawnee. On *Parks*, Ann is introduced in the first episode, while on *The Office*, Karen does not appear until Season Three, and is pitted as the "other woman," obstructing Pam and Jim's potential relationship. As a less threatening female and without a name signifying a potential non-white background, Ann is not questioned about her race, nor must she affirm a white background. Though both *Parks* and *The Office* use heavy satire and poke fun at small town America and workplace politics, the female characters on *Parks* are more assertive and three-dimensional, and the non-white characters come from, or have attained, higher socioeconomic status.[149] As a result, Ann Perkins does not fall into the stereotype of a tragic figure whose chances for long-lasting romance are limited or cause her to be viewed as deviant. However, Ann's character still lacks the nuance that can come from an ethnic or racial identity or

[148] Though Ann is featured much less than Leslie.

[149] On *The Office*, the primary non-white characters are Kelly Kapoor, Darryl Philbin, and Oscar Martinez. Kelly works as a customer service associate, Darryl is the foreman of Dunder Mifflin's warehouse, Oscar is in accounting. On *Parks*, Donna Meagle, an African American woman, is the office manager of the Department of Parks and Recreation, invests in a local club, and drives a Mercedes-Benz. South Asian Tom Haverford is the Department of Parks and Recreation Administrator and an up-and-coming entrepreneur.

backstory. As Margaret Lyons writes, unlike the other characters, "There's no similar depth to Ann, no edge, no weirdness, no silliness, no dorkery."[150]

Ann's difference is readable to the other characters, acknowledged by Leslie as something that sets her apart and makes her a perfect best friend, yet it is also something that Leslie cannot leave alone. In *Parks'* fourth season, Ann's ambiguity and mixed race were used to stand for racial progress and a move toward post-race. In Season Four, Episode 22, "Win, Lose, or Draw" (air date May 10, 2012), Leslie—known for being an eternal optimist and showering Ann with odd, but endearing compliments, and for loving both Ann and local government fiercely—makes positive assertions of Ann's race that compare it to the realization of the "American Dream."[151] During an election party while Leslie nervously awaits the results of the campaign for Pawnee City Councilor, Ann comes to offer support. Despite the party going on in the background (a flat-screen TV showing news of the polls, attendees drinking and chatting), the camera closes in on the two best friends, framing them in the center of the screen. Ann's hair is highlighted, and she is made up in bright pink blush and matching lipstick. Shown from the torso up, Ann wears an unbuttoned burgundy cardigan with a V-neck white blouse underneath. An "I Voted" sticker with a blue background and a picture of the United States flag is affixed to her sweater. Thankful for Ann's support, Leslie looks at her friend lovingly, touches Ann's arm, and says in a slightly apologetic voice, "I've said this to you before and I know it makes you uncomfortable."[152] Before Leslie can continue, she is cut off by Ann commenting, "Oh boy," realizing that one of Leslie's well-meaning but awkward accolades is about to follow. Leslie

---

[150] Margaret Lyons, "How Do You Solve *Parks and Rec's* Ann Perkins Problem?" *Vulture*, February 16, 2012, accessed November 8, 2015.

[151] "The Best Weird Compliments Leslie Gives to Ann on *Parks and Recreation*," *Vulture*, February 23, 2015, accessed November 8, 2015. It is a running joke that Leslie gives Ann "intense, perplexing compliments."

[152] *Parks and Recreation.*

continues, “but you’re thoughtful and you’re brilliant.”[153] The camera cuts to just Ann’s face as she smiles sheepishly. Leslie then adds, “and your ambiguous ethnic blend perfectly represents the dream of the American melting pot.”[154] While Ann is still shown smiling, discomfort marks her face, and she pulls Leslie away so they can leave the party.

Leslie’s matter-of-fact commentary on racial difference makes Ann’s background visible and ordinary, rather than ignored. However, Leslie’s recognition that Ann is uneasy with such praise indicates that Leslie is aware that pointing out Ann’s ethnic and racial difference are disconcerting to Ann despite Leslie’s well-meaning intentions.[155] Leslie’s cheerful but unwieldy statement references the twenty-first century’s multiracial era where mixed race and ambiguity are desired, and mixed individuals like Ann stand for harmony between the races. Pointing out that Ann is not white or exclusively white is also a nod to Jones’ real-life identity. That the exchange takes place during an election party, and during a real Presidential election year in the United States, lends itself to references of President Obama, the post-race era, and the racial progress he was believed to symbolize. Joseph writes, “Obama linked his accessibility and success to his multiraciality, which he coded as post-racial proof of the American Dream.”[156] Connecting Ann to images of racial advancement and multiple backgrounds goes beyond unmarked white and gives her an identity that lends itself to positive associations. This is progress for mixed-race characters; Ann is neither relegated to tragedy or stereotypes, nor is her identity covered or erased. Yet, similar to Karen Filipelli, Ann is repeatedly identified by

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

[155] See tvtropes.org. Racial ambiguity is a common television trope that is referred to as “ambiguously brown.” An ambiguously brown character will have “skin tone that is definitely not Northern European, but it is not entirely clear what ethnicity they’re supposed to be.” Here, Ann could be of a singular race that is difficult to read or a combination of two or more races; therefore, I deem her as having potential mixed race.

[156] Joseph, 158.

someone else in a way she is not completely comfortable with. Ann is not given the choice of if or how to express her identity; despite being the second lead, Ann is primarily defined by her friendship to Leslie, and is not a fully formed character.

Aside from a skin color that accounts for Ann's ambiguity, her lack of ethnic identifiers code her as normative white until Leslie points out her hybrid background.[157] Ann has recognizable and easily-pronounceable first and last names. Both the given name "Ann" and the surname "Perkins" have English roots, but are common in the United States.[158] Unlike her Indian American coworker Tom Haverford (born Darwish Sabir Ismail Gani and played by Aziz Ansari), there is no indication that Ann anglicized either of her names to adhere to American conventions. While Tom's Indian ancestry is articulated—he has a backstory for his name that does not match his ethnic identity—Ann has no such past, leaving her identity open to inferences.[159]

In contrast with the conflicts the Karens caused on *Freaks* and *The Office*, Ann causes very little tension or disruption on *Parks*, partly because she is rather dull, unlike most of the recurring cast members who have intricate quirks. Lyons writes that Ann is "the one resident of Pawnee who has no such definition, one who rarely gets quotable lines and seems only rarely essential to the story."[160] Since her character only appears for a few moments at a time and is not critical to advancing the plot, she often seems to exist merely as a confidante and support system for Leslie. Little is known about Ann, and what is revealed is often almost intentionally lackluster. Lyons writes, "Ann is . . . . a nurse. We know she sort of dislikes jogging, appears to

[157] However, Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins comments that Jones is "marked as Italian" when she plays Karen Scarfolli, Karen Filipelli, and Ann Perkins (125). I have found no other sources stating that Ann is Italian.

[158] Perkins is the last name of one of the casting directors for *Parks*, Nancy Perkins.

[159] On *Parks*, Tom's racial difference leads to questions regarding his American citizenship since in the small, racially homogenous town of Pawnee, Indiana, he is the only South Asian.

[160] Lyons.

own a home, and is Leslie's BFF. . . . She works for the health department now, as an excuse to have her physically present at the office, but she rarely has stakes in anything that's happening."[161] Without Leslie adding a layer of racial difference to Ann's identity, and Ann dating men of various backgrounds, Ann's non-descript persona and average appearance cause her to fade into the background in a way the Karens on *Freaks* and *The Office* never could.

Though Ann's skin is noticeably darker than most of the other women in Pawnee, it does not cause confusion and never contributes to her being sexualized the way Karen was on *The Office*.[162] Ann's background regularly goes unmentioned except by Leslie, who emphasizes Ann's differences. While only a few of Leslie's comments specifically reference ethnic ambiguity and mixed race, she regularly praises Ann for being unique. In Season 6, Episode 16, "Galantine's Day," Leslie deems Ann's distinct racial background the reason that she is an unmatched friend. In this episode, Ann has left Pawnee and has just had her first baby. As the two lie next to each other atop Ann's bed in the light blue delivery room, Leslie tells Ann she cannot find a replacement best friend. As the camera focuses on the two from the chest up, Leslie adoringly remarks, "nobody can match your ethnic hybrid energy," and then rests her head on Ann's shoulder for comfort.[163] Side by side, the contrast in their complexions is especially obvious: Leslie's yellow-blond hair, fair skin, rosy cheeks, and blue eyes are distinct from Ann's brown hair, light brown skin, and green eyes.

Leslie's praise of Ann consists of excessive flattery about Ann's beauty, backhanded compliments that reinforce Ann's unfortunate situations, and venture into stereotypes about

---

[161] Ibid. "It's our persistent fondness for [Rashida Jones] that makes us wish Ann had more of a deal on the show."

[162] The exception is Donna Meagle (Rhetta). Donna reaffirms and breaks stereotypes about African American women. She is heavyset, self-absorbed, financially well off, and dates multiple men. Her character exists for comedic value and adds diversity to the cast. Donna coaches the naive Ann on how to "play the field."

[163] *Parks and Recreation.*

hybrid vigor that repeatedly assert Ann's racial difference.[164] Known for her quirky and perpetual good nature, Eric Barbera writes, "Leslie celebrated her BFF the only way she knew how; intense, perplexing, compliments."[165] Leslie's comparing Ann to animals, remarking on her unconventional behavior, sympathizing with her perceived inadequacies, and bragging about her heroism were ways of differentiating Ann, celebrating her, and expressing confusion with how to classify her—all of which illustrate the way mixed people can be objectified, exoticized, and cause unease in others. Williams-León and Nakashima write, "'mixed beings' have been and continue to be an iconographic source of enigma and intrigue within American Popular culture."[166] Some of Leslie's most memorable compliments that can relate to Ann's mixed background include:

> Ann, you beautiful tropical fish. You're smart as a whip and you're cool under pressure.
> Oh, Ann, you beautiful spinster. I will find you love.
> Oh, Ann, you beautiful, rule-breaking moth.
> Ann, you are such a good friend, you're a beautiful, talented, brilliant, powerful musk ox. Thank you, ox.
> You've resuscitated a human heart in your bare hands.
> You're Ann Perkins! Sperm that is worthy of your perfect eggs does not grow on trees.

One remark in particular that ties in all of the types of praise that Leslie emotes is derived from hybrid vigor that racially mixed people were believed to possess. At the start of Season Five, in Episode 12, "Ann's Decision," Ann decides to date herself, and she and Leslie discuss some of

---

[164] See Marcia Dawkins, "What the 'Mixed Kids Are Always So Beautiful' Meme Really Means," *The Huffington Post*, October 22, 2013, accessed June 15, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-alesan-dawkins/what-the-mixed-kids-are-always-so-beautiful-meme-really-means_b_3792596.html. "The biological phenomenon that predicts that crossbreeding leads to offspring that are genetically fitter than their parents. Hybrid vigor makes mixed race people somehow biologically different and prettier than non-mixed (non-white) people by nature."

[165] Eric Barbera, "The Best Weird Compliments Leslie Gives Ann on *Parks and Recreation*," *Vulture,* February 23, 2015, accessed June 3, 2016.

[166] Teresa Williams-León and Cynthia Nakashima, "Reconfiguring Race, Rearticulating Ethnicity," in *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*, eds. Teresa Williams-León and Cynthia Nakashima (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 4.

the activities Ann will be taking on alone. Ann mentions that her next venture is to have a baby and asks Leslie to accompany her to a sperm bank. While Leslie does not agree with Ann's choice, her response combines Leslie's adoration of and high hopes for Ann and the mixed background of any children she may have.[167] "Ann, you know that I fully support any woman's decision, especially a beautiful unicorn nurse like yourself, in creating the family that she wants. But you are so brilliant and kind and stupid hot, you're definitely going to find a wonderful guy who loves you and respects you and fills your home with multiethnic genius babies."[168] While *Parks* never gives Ann's identity context or concrete signifiers, Leslie's view of Ann encompasses the positive qualities of mixed-race individuals that mirrored the turn-of-the-twenty-first-century's racial optimism. Through Ann, Leslie comments on a racial era where mixed race is celebrated and idealized, and particular racial backgrounds do not always matter.

When Leslie's compliments border on taboo and racially derived, the satiric nature of the show, Leslie's adoration of Ann, and her cheerful delivery make them seem less offensive. Leslie deems Ann a "tricky bastard," "devious bastard," and "coy bastard;" Baker writes, "When said lovingly, the word 'bastard' takes on a fun and dangerous edge."[169] Leslie may be commenting on Ann's resourcefulness, intellect, and ability to shock, but despite her idiosyncrasies, "bastard" has historical roots in the children of interracial relationships who were once deemed illegitimate due to their racial mixture. Calling Ann a "bastard," especially one that is "tricky, coy, and devious," reinforces the illicit connotations that being mixed race still invoke.

---

[167] The men Ann chooses as potential donors are all white. After an irreverent radio broadcast about Ann looking for a donor, Councilman Milton, an elderly Pawnee employee who wants to be considered as a potential donor, is the only person to describe Ann using a specific ethnic identity: "I just wanted to toss my name in the ring in respect to this Indian woman's vagina."

[168] *Parks and Recreation*.

[169] Whitney Baker, "The Top 8 Leslie Knope Terms of Endearment," *Paste*, May 27, 2014, accessed June 3, 2016.

However, because race, like almost all serious topics, is not taken too seriously on *Parks*, Leslie's remarks cause Ann momentary confusion but are quickly overlooked. Further, being able to tease at what is forbidden is part of Leslie's fascination with Ann. The two were mistaken for a couple more than once with Leslie remarking that they are both "tragically heterosexual."[170]

Despite Ann's ambiguity being jokingly referenced as deviant by Leslie, it did not make others uneasy, and Ann was generally accepted as racially unmarked. When Jones left *Parks* halfway through Season Six, in Episode 12, "Ann and Chris," Ann was pregnant and she and Chris were moving to Michigan to be near her family.[171] Critics were unanimous that Ann was no longer a necessary part of the show since her character's story line was fairly unimportant and out of line with the rest of the cast.[172] Additionally, Jones was ready to leave the show to work on other projects.[173] If Ann's racial background had been under scrutiny the way Karen Filipelli's was, she may not have had such long-lasting romantic relationships, and her mid-season departure could have opened the door to questions of whether Ann's exit was to prevent having to deal with her family (i.e., grandparents and the soon-to-be baby, and how to racially code them). Further, Ann was not a short-term cast member, but integrated into the show for six out of seven seasons. Characters like Ann still symbolize hesitancy toward portraying a fully formed mixed-race character.

---

[170] See Season Five, episode 12, "Ann's Decision." See also Season One, episode 5, "The Banquet."

[171] Not able to find a suitable donor, Ann asked ex-boyfriend Chris to be the father. She becomes pregnant through in-vitro fertilization but ends up reuniting with Chris. They raise the baby together and later have a second child.

[172] See Lyons, "How Do You Solve *Parks and Rec's* Ann Perkins Problem?" and "*Parks and Rec* Will Be Fine Without Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones – and Maybe Better." See Drumming, "Goodbye to Ann Perkins: Can "Parks and Recreation" Still End on a High Note?" and Ryan, "Why are Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones Leaving 'Parks and Rec'? EP Mike Schur Says Decision Was Mutual."

[173] Maureen Ryan, "Why Are Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones Leaving 'Parks and Rec'? EP Mike Schur Says Decision Was Mutual," *Huffington Post,* August 1, 2013, accessed November 8, 2015.

Opening Doors for Black Women While Playing Racially Neutral

In *Celeste and Jesse Forever* (2012), for which Jones was a screenwriter and created a role for herself loosely based on her own experiences, Jones' character, Celeste, was coded as racially neutral, and there was no mention of race in the film. The quirky comedy challenged the routine formula of a romantic comedy: it focused on end of a marriage between Celeste and Jesse (Andy Samberg). As has been the norm with most of Jones' recent roles, discussions of race or the potential interracial aspects of Celeste and Jesse's relationship were not mentioned. If one did not know of Jones' background, Celeste could be understood as white, since she does not exhibit any identity markers that differ from a conventional white middle-class construction.

The production of *Celeste* was a significant moment for Jones' career as a mixed and African American screenwriter and actress. The screenplay earned Jones and co-writer, Will McCormack, an Independent Spirit Award, Best First Screenplay nomination in addition to Black Reel award nominations for Best Actress and Best Screenplay. Because African American screenwriters and lead roles for African American actresses are exceedingly rare, the nominations were especially notable achievements.[174]

Due to the paucity of black female screenwriters, *Celeste and Jesse Forever* was deemed innovative; yet despite Jones inspiring both the character Celeste and the relationship in the film, race was not a part of Celeste's life.[175] In an interview with Kevin Polowy, Jones remarked, "this was a fully selfish pursuit. We wrote it for me to act in."[176] The lack of explicit reference to race

[174] According to the *2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script*, which uses the 2012–2013 year for reporting purposes, in 2013, 12.9 % of writers of Hollywood films were women and 11.8% were minorities, compared with 14.1% and 7.6% in 2011. In 2012, when *Celeste and Jesse* premiered, 7.6% of writers were minorities. Minorities only had lead roles in 16.7% of films in 2013 and 10.15% in 2011.

[175] Celeste and Jesse's relationship is based off of Jones and McCormack's short-lived romance.

[176] Kevin Polowy, "Q&A: Rashida Jones on Writing, Ron Swanson and Irrationality Over Her Race," *Nextmovie*, August 2, 2012, accessed November 3, 2015.

in the film exemplifies a neutral approach that is in line with the way Jones' characters have been coded in previous performances, but deviates from her many public statements where she expressed pride in her mixed background.The cast is almost exclusively white, aside from a few African Americans who occupy non-speaking roles and have very limited screen time.[177] Rebecca Carroll, writing for *Ebony*, provides a balanced critique on Jones' character constructions and potential casting choices.[178] As a racially mixed African American, Carroll hoped Jones might pay even a small tribute to her background, especially as the creator of the film.[179] Since Jones regularly plays characters coded as neutral, Carroll expected Jones, as a writer, to take this opportunity to add race into the film: ". . . it's not that she has to wear a t-shirt announcing her Black power pride, but it might be nice if there was at least some kind of acknowledgement or evidence that race matters, or has had an influence on her life."[180] Here, Jones is seen as having the potential to open doors for African Americans and those of mixed race.[181] Nakamura argues, "multiracial fans have a unique stake in multiracial stars acknowledging their 'darker' racial heritage," and black audiences also have "expectations regarding star conduct in terms of racial identity."[182] However, when Jones expresses her racial fluidity in a way that shows detachment from her black ancestry and results in favoring whites on

[177] Jones' casting and character constructions, which lacked mixed or African American characters, was surprising due to her past commentary of wanting to create opportunities for mixed actresses.

[178] Rebecca Carroll, "Movie Review: *Celeste and Jesse Forever*," *Ebony*, August 8, 2013, accessed March 2, 2015.

[179] Carroll's biographical information indicates she is African American and white but identifies as black.

[180] Carroll.

[181] See Jasmine Tigget, "Review: Rashida Jones Stars in 'Celeste and Jesse Forever' (in Theaters Today)," *Indiewire*, 2012, accessed June 5, 2016. Due to Jones' "allegiance" to blackness being questioned from pretty much the beginning of her career, Tigget understands why black audiences might not support this endeavor. However, she argues, "in a community that constantly seeks more roles and versatility for people of color in Hollywood, a solid film starring and written by a black person that strays outside conventional ideas of blackness seems more helpful than harmful."

[182] Nakamura, 71.

screen, she plays a part in the continuing marginalization of black and mixed actors. She also limits representations of African Americans and mixed-race people on screen.[183]

Including a black, part-black, mixed, or even ethnically specific identity for Celeste would be unsurprising, since Jones has previously played both African American and mixed characters and has repeatedly claimed both a black *and* a racially mixed identity with emphasis on her Jewish culture. Speaking with Polowy, Jones asserted her right to identify as any or all of her races as a reaction to the way fans and the media were "impos[ing] all these weird, cultural, socio arguments on the way I look."[184] She then stumbled over her self-articulation as white, remarking, "I identify with being white . . . well I don't even know what that means, but I identify with the Jewish culture."[185]

As a practitioner of the Jewish faith, Jones' affiliation with Jewish heritage is stronger than general white (non-ethnic or culturally specific) identity, or even her aforementioned Irish ancestry. Further, Jewish identity in America is not as readily collapsible into generic whiteness as many European ethnicities can be. In acknowledging her Jewish ancestry, Jones asserts another part of her background that has factored significantly into her life.[186] Jones also told Bardin of *Women's Health Magazine*, "I do identify with being black, and if people don't identify me that way, that's their issue."[187] However, because cultural identity is absent from the film, Celeste is not coded as black, mixed, Jewish, or with any specific ethnic background. She is

[183] Jones disappoints those who feel a connection to her due to racial similarity. See also Nakamura, 71. The virtual community of Mixedfolks.com, "believe stars have a social duty and implicit obligation to represent their minority heritage when they gain a place in the public eye."

[184] Polowy.

[185] Ibid.

[186] See Sheila Weller. "Are you white or are you black?"

[187] Bardin.

simply a raceless character despite the multiple racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of her creator and the pride Jones previously expressed in being part of all of them.

Regardless of how Jones identifies off screen, the media and her Hollywood roles often determine how she is racially understood; her image was first constructed as a symbol of racial harmony when multiracial individuals were gaining greater acceptance, and when mixed but non-racially-specific appearances were in vogue.[188] As an actress and also in some interviews, Jones presents a race-neutral image, which is desirable because it works to avoid complex discussions of race. Nakamura calls this presentation an "unmarked racial otherness" that is deemed safe and is pleasing to Hollywood and many audiences.[189] This image helps Jones claim both a black and racially mixed identity, yet due to her appearance and the way it is constructed, she can still be a version of the girl-next-door. She has close to an ideal status for multiracial actors; she can convincingly play almost any race.[190] Much of the hype over a potential post-race era included celebrating what Nakamura describes as the type of racial mixture that gained widespread appeal for an ambiguity that has some racial distinctness but minimizes blackness. She wrote, "Celebrity mixed race identity that aspires to global standing needs to claim and defend a position of unmarked racial otherness: while it will not admit or allow its identity as belonging to a particular race . . . it is equally zealous about eschewing normative whiteness."[191] Beltrán adds, "Not all types of racial ambiguity are necessarily embraced equally. . . . Indigenous

[188] I.e., the 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census options to check more than one box, the years leading up to and during Barack Obama's initial election.

[189] Nakamura, 72.

[190] Non-white actors playing other races usually do not generate the same backlash that whites face when they cross-racially perform, or when members of any race resort to antiquated methods of costuming such as Blackface or Yellowface. One notable instance where a racially mixed actor was criticized for cross-racially performing was Fred Armisen playing Barack Obama. See Chapter Three for an in-depth analysis.

[191] Ibid.

and African ancestry continues to be denied and denigrated . . . while fair skin is typically celebrated."[192]

Few mixed performers effortlessly move between races and play characters of diverse backgrounds or take on circumstantial racial identifications without critical backlash.[193] As an actress who has played a variety of races on television and in film, Rashida Jones' is one such performer, and her career can be used as a lens through which to view how performances by mixed-race actors playing mixed-race characters contribute to, but more often disrupt, ideas about being in a post-racial era. Though Jones is routinely applauded for her acting skills and likeability, color-blind racism regularly informs her characters. They are confined to antiquated stereotypes, only partially formed, and kept detached from a racial background when she is in a lead role. While Jones can present ever-shifting racial identifications that demonstrate her agency in choosing to highlight specific parts of her background, her known ancestry can impose limits on her character portrayals. Jones is symbolic of racial progress, and her on-screen roles reveal the fluidity of race, yet the restrictions imposed on her identifications and performances reiterate perpetual unease with racially mixed individuals and persistent racism that keeps them from being portrayed as fully formed characters on screen.

[192] 262–63.

[193] This is not to say that they don't move between spaces or experience instances of fluidity, but that it can still take work on the part of the individual, and they will not always be received or understood in the position they are adopting. Being racially mixed does not mean being equally divided between two or more races. This works against attempts at seamless fluidity.

CHAPTER TWO

Thandie Newton: A Twenty-First Century Tragic Figure

At the turn of the twenty-first century, racially mixed actress Thandie Newton was deemed a symbol of racial progress due to starring in roles across races and standing for colorblind casting; at the same time, her roles revealed Hollywood's and the directors' latent racism, as she was regularly cast as stereotypes of mixed characters. Despite her black ancestry, some black audiences and film critics deemed her inappropriate to play a character of singular African ethnicity or race.[1] Appearing racially fluid, Newton has been cast in roles where mixed race is synonymous with a black identity, and in roles where being part-white and having lighter skin is distinct from and privileged over singular black identity. Often, instead of positive or racially neutral constructions of mixed race in line with modern celebrations of mixed individuals, her roles reinforced antiquated tropes of mixed-race women burdened by an inherently illicit background. Despite directors' intentions of exposing latent racism and including racial diversity through Newton's mixed-race characters, many end up doing the opposite. These characters reinforce current racism and unease with mixed-race females as they are constructed as inseparable from and painfully impacted by racial trauma or sexual abuse derived from their mixed ancestry.

Newton's mixed background, which contributes to her versatility and ability to perform across races and film genres, is the result of an unconventional family and clash of cultures that profoundly impacted her youth. Newton was born Thandiwe Nashita Newton on November 6, 1972, in London, England. Shortly after her birth, her family moved to Zambia where they resided until she was three years old. Her mother is a native of Zimbabwe; her father is British.

[1] See Ed Siegel, "Love is Becoming Colorblind on Film," *The Boston Globe*, July 6, 2000, accessed September 28 2016.

On their return to England, the family settled in Penzance, Cornwall. There, Newton and her brother "were the only black children in the area."[2] In a 2011 *TED* talk, "Embracing Otherness, Embracing Myself," Newton shared her experiences of growing up in England where her family was "challenging to most people."[3] She was made acutely aware that "my hair wasn't right. My history wasn't right . . . in that social world, I didn't really exist. And I was 'other' before being anything else."[4] As a teen, lacking any kind of community, Newton was drawn to performing; it gave her a means of escaping the parts of herself she saw as "dysfunctional."[5] She became "a full-fledged movie actor" at age nineteen, and soon after graduated from Cambridge.[6]

Newton's earliest—and some of her most notable—characters are similar to her young self: they are outcasts and have conflicted racial identities, others are crude or pitiful figures and embody elements of the tragic mulatta trope even when the director's intent is to critique racism. Some of Newton's most renowned roles in independent and Hollywood films are those of beautiful, volatile, and highly sexual women whose mixed race is essential to their desirability, but whose racial difference bars them from full integration into a white or black community. Despite being included in films as a character whose role is to help counter stereotypes, some of Newton's characters undergo trauma and isolation that cause them to become defined by their anger. Lacking a full range of emotions, and without redemption, these characters appear flat. Thus, instead of demonstrating a break from stereotypes, mixed race is reiterated as problematic, and Newton's characters fall back into stereotypes that directors originally set out to overcome.

---

[2] Daily Mail Reporter, "Thandie Newton: How Do You Feel about Being Mixed-Race?" *Daily Mail UK*, April 10, 2009, accessed November 19, 2013, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1168266/Thandie-Newton-How-feel-mixed-race.html.

[3] Thandie Newton, "Embracing Otherness, Embracing Myself," (lecture, Ted Global, Edinburgh, Scotland, July 2011).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

Newton is cast in a variety of roles that demonstrate the racial fluidity available to some racially mixed performers. She is sometimes cast as black, sometimes as white, and other times as mixed-race, racially ambiguous, or without a racial identity. When left unstated, the racial identity of Newton's characters can usually be discerned by the context of the film, the race of the rest of the cast, and whether or not the film deals with racial issues. As a character actress, Newton does not always have a leading role; however, her portrayals are critical to advancing and completing the overarching story.

While many of Newton's performances have been in the United States and in Hollywood films, Newton does not view herself as African American despite sharing struggles similar to mixed-race African American actresses.[7] Newton's English roots and accent, and her Zimbabwean background and name distinguish her from African American performers with a black identity rooted in America.[8] Due to distance from America and African American culture, there are cultural differences between Newton and many of her black and mixed African American characters but many of their gender or class struggles can be universally applied. However, like several of her characters and many mixed actresses in the U.S., Newton shares a past of internal conflict due to being part of two races. Newton's casting also reveals the ways an international actress with mixed ancestry undergoes racialization that is similar to mixed African American actresses, and is subject to the same problematic character constructions of race on-

[7] Lloyd Bradley, "Fine and Thandie: Actress Thandie Newton sits close and spills the secrets of marital chemistry, saving the planet, and her sweet life flying beneath Hollywood's radar," *Best Life,* March 2007, accessed December 1, 2010. "Had I been an African-American woman, I would have played Christine Thayer [in *Crash*] differently." Sergio Mims, "Color Me Thandie: Actress Thandie Newton talks *Colored Girls,* Stereotypes, and Why She Doesn't Want to Be a Movie Star," *Ebony,* n.d., accessed April 21, 2011. She can play African American slaves because their history is not her history.

[8] Kam Williams, "Thandie Newton – The Crash Interview," *African American Literature Book Club,* n.d., accessed April 26, 2011. Discussing her character Christine Thayer in *Crash,* Newton told Williams, "The only thing that separated the character from me, in a way, was the accent." Early in her acting career, Newton worked under the name Thandie Adjewa. She changed her screen name to Newton, her father's surname, on her second try acting in the United States.

screen. Her appearance that is representative of mixed African heritage is celebrated when trendy, however having skin color that differs from solely white or black has been traumatic. Newton identifies as black and racially mixed, but is regularly identified by others based on where she is geographically; in England she is perceived as black, whereas she is perceived as white in different African countries.

Unlike African American performers who do not identify with a specific African ethnicity, Newton's sense of self is influenced by her intimate connection to Zimbabwe and time spent doing charity work in several African countries. African identity is also attached to her immediate family and her mother's language and upbringing in Zimbabwe. Newton has characterized Africa as "the biggest melting pot of all."[9] Compared to her experience in England, where she spent the majority of her life and was made to feel like an outsider, in Africa Newton felt welcomed.

Despite being used to depict underlying racism and to feature mixed race, many of Newton's characters are inseparable from and severely impacted by their mixed background; they also have similarities to Newton's past racial trauma and sexual abuse. Newton's mixed-race identity was a source of pain and marginalization that eventually became trendy and symbolic of racial progress. Several of her mixed characters share similar anguish, but they lack redemption. These repeated images of partially formed female characters at a time when the news media and American society were praising racial mixture revealed conflicting views of mixed race that were underscored in Newton's roles. Her mixed characters often reaffirmed outdated tropes and a limited version of mixed identity. They were isolated, tragic figures; and remained inseparable from illicit sexual behavior. Even when making an effort to critique racism

[9] Kathryn Bromwich, "Thandie Newton: 'I needed to play someone who doesn't fit a stereotype," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, accessed April 30, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jul/20/thandie-newton-doesnt-fit-stereotype-half-a-yellow-sun.

and sexism against black and mixed women, a director's white privilege and male gaze often revealed unease with mixed-race female characters. The result was heavy reliance on familiar but demeaning stereotypes or imbuing Newton's characters with deviance and hyper-sexuality.

Further, these mixed-race characters were repeatedly lusted after or abused by white males. This treatment mirrored Newton's past sexual exploitation by male casting directors when she was in her late teens.[10] Newton and the some of the characters she later played were sexualized by male directors off screen and male characters on screen who held significant racial and gender power over them. These roles were cathartic for Newton; her own pain and anger were expressed through her characters.[11] For instance, *Crash*'s "hand-rape" scene left Newton angered with Haggis for not being straightforward about what she would endure and how to plan her character's response.[12] This type of sexual manipulation has followed Newton since the beginning of her film career; her portrayals of mixed race as being a burden and carrying inherent sexuality mirrored her off-screen experiences as a mixed black female actress in Hollywood.

Being mixed race also damages Newton's characters' romantic relationships. Her mixed characters are often the cause of the couple's trouble, partly due to their conflicted ancestry and outsider status. The tension between Newton's mixed characters and their partners depicts their relationships as fraught, even when the characters share a part-white ancestry and cultural identity. In same-race relationships, where Newton and her significant other are both racially

---

[10] E. Alex Jung, "Thandie Newton's Story of Sexual Abuse During an Audition is Still Horrifying," *Vulture*, July 1, 2016, accessed February 24, 2017.

[11] Reginald Ponder, "*The Root* Interview: Thandie Newton on 'For Colored Girls'," *The Root*, Novembet 5, 2011, accessed June 30, 2017, https://www.theroot.com/the-root-interview-thandie-newton-on-for-colored-girls-1790881509.

[12] "Newton Still Upset with Crash Director Over Rape Scene," *Contact Music*, February 13, 2007, accessed February 23, 2017, http://www.contactmusic.com/thandie-newton/news/newton-still-upset-with-crash-director-over-rape-scene_1021969.

mixed (*Crash*), or where Newton is mixed but accepted as black (*For Colored Girls*), Newton's character's troubled identity results in her lashing out at and resenting men she is involved with romantically or sexually. The difficulties that Newton's characters bring to their relationships stem from their anger, social isolation, or trauma derived from their mixed race that they cannot escape.

Despite being a racially fluid, mixed black performer, Newton has been criticized by audiences and film critics for attempting to embody black characters known to the public as singularly African or African American. Regardless of her strong identification with a black identity, Zimbabwean ancestry, and having an appearance and skin color that can be coded as black, Newton's mixed ancestry has caused her to be deemed an inappropriate fit to play real-life African Americans or a character of a specific African ethnicity. In these cases, because the characters were well known from popular literary texts (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) or are real people (Condoleezza Rice in *W*), there were expectations that the actress would more closely resemble the images that audiences were familiar with. When Newton is deemed inappropriate to play a black character, the limits to mixed race being understood as racially and culturally fluid are revealed.

As a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century mixed-race performer, Thandie Newton acts across races and film genres, breaks racial and casting boundaries for mixed performers, and has resisted being pigeonholed or detached from a racial identity despite her celebrity increasing. Newton's casting as racially ambiguous has stood for racial progress, the decreasing significance of race, and the celebration of a post-race era. Her mixed characters provide commentary on latent but persistent racism and have given screen time to mixed and black female stories that have historically been ignored. However, at the same time, many of these characters reinforce

degrading and antiquated tropes of mixed race that the directors initially sought to overcome. Even when critiquing racism and the exploitation of mixed and black women, both black and white male directors have constructed Newton's characters with heavy reliance on outdated tropes. Thus, despite the evolution that Newton's casting symbolizes, many of her characters remain inseparable from illicit and highly sexual depictions of mixed race that not only reveal the lasting power of the tragic mulatta on screen, but the need to reprimand female mixed race characters, asserting an unease with racially mixed women that goes beyond the screen.

A Tragic, Deviant, and Highly Sexual Sympathetic Character

Flirting (1991), directed by John Duigan, is an Australian film that takes place in 1965; in this coming of age story, Newton plays lead character Thandiwe Adjewa, a racially mixed and sexually confident international student whose differences from her peers construct her as disruptive and needing of discipline. *Flirting* takes place at a strict boarding school where despite being the most sympathetically rendered character, Thandiwe's race immediately marginalizes her from the high school's social groups. Similar to common portrayals of racially mixed characters and Newton's own experiences, Thandiwe, even as a teen, is highly sexualized due to her non-white background, which the white male teens view as exotic. Thandiwe is the first of several characters played by Newton that indicate a step toward progress due to the fact that the character is given a diverse background, but Thandiwe's character ultimately falls back on the trope of conflating mixed females with illicit sexuality followed by punishment.

Though *Flirting* is an Australian film—and in fact won the 1990 Australian Film Institute Award for Best Film—it gained rave review in the United States and quickly became a cult

classic. Deemed one of the "50 Best High School Movies"[13] by *Entertainment Weekly* and listed on Roger Ebert's "The Best 10 Movies of 1992" list,[14] *Flirting* established Newton's reputation with U.S. audiences for playing the role of a highly sexualized mixed woman, which she would do many more times throughout her career.

Newton's character, transfer student Thandiwe Adjewa, is marginalized yet desired because of her mixed and African ancestry, which sets her apart within the single-sex, racially homogenous boarding schools Cirencester Ladies College and St. Albans in rural Australia. Australia has both similarities with and differences from America's fraught race relations. While located in the Pacific and without the history of African slavery like the U.S., racial inequalities between white Australians and non-whites (aboriginals) have been similarly foundational. Persistent racism in Australian society is reflected in *Flirting*. It influences interactions and hierarchies between white characters and Newton's non-white and mixed-race character. In *Flirting*, damaging tropes common to US films surface in similar ways. Thandiwe is treated with what Lori Palmer writes is "inherent racism within the educational, cultural framework of the world she has entered. She is at the nexus of Britain, Australia and Africa and, as such, pulls together the threads of historical events that shaped their inter-national perceptions."[15] Since *Flirting* is set in Australia, the racial dynamics that play out mirror racial thought that was prevalent among this particular group of Australians in 1965. Palmer writes, "Private boarding schools in Australia were modelled on those in Britain, with their accompanying prejudices and

[13] EW Staff, *50 Best High School Movies*, accessed September 9, 2015.

[14] Roger Ebert, "The Best 10 Movies of 1992," *RogerEbert.com*, December 31, 1992, accessed April 22, 2016. *Flirting* debuted in Australia in 1991 and was released in the United States in 1992.

[15] Lori Palmer, "The Many Faces of Disinclination: Australian Feminist/Post-Colonialist Reflections on *Flirting*." *Senses of Cinema*, November 2007, accessed June 26, 2017.

social structures."[16] Here, persistent hierarchies of English over African are revealed as the culturally English students view Thandiwe and her homeland as inferior. Australian film critic Lynden Barber writes of the "depiction of racism as a daily fact of life in the mid-1960s. Racism is so normal here that it's arguable whether the girl pupils who bully Thandiwe . . . would even recognise it as such."[17] Reviewing the film for the *Los Angeles Times*, David Gritten wrote that Duigan's "films critique uniformity, prejudice, sexism, and intellectual torpor."[18] Thandiwe's Ugandan, Kenyan, and British background and her Ugandan nationality keep her from being able to simply exist among her peers. Duigan singles her out, racializes, sexualizes, isolates, and punishes her, all based on her difference and unwillingness to socially conform. By treating Thandiwe this way in a film that is meant to criticize lingering racism, Duigan reveals how easy it is to slip back into the recycled, degrading depictions of mixed black female characters, despite trying to construct Thandiwe as more thoughtful and intelligent than her Australian classmates.

Thandiwe's peers are unable to see past her African ancestry; they imagine and construct her as inherently different, exotic, and unassimilable. Her home country of Uganda is understood as a faraway place in Africa, and when Thandiwe speaks of the crisis occurring there, its political issues are of no importance to her peers, who deem the country inferior to Australia. When Danny (Noah Taylor), an awkward and unpopular boy and the lead male in the film, takes an interest in Thandiwe, he makes an effort to learn about Africa in an attempt to learn more about her. Danny's subsequent research on Africa turns up images of wild animals and savage warriors, and causes him to recall Tarzan movies. These antiquated images of an uncivilized

---

[16] Ibid.

[17] Lynden Barber, "Flirting," *Australian Screen*, n.d., March 24, 2017.

[18] David Gritten, "Going Through the Years in 'Voice' and 'Flirting' : Movies: Writer-director John Duigan's trilogy tackles the formative years of growing up in a small Australian town," *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1992, accessed March 27, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-11-27/entertainment/ca-1060_1_john-duigan.

Africa function as Duigan's critique of the racist stereotypes that persist and are perpetuated by Hollywood and print media. Lynden Barber writes that *Flirting* presents a "picture of a relatively ignorant era in which blackness was so different that it could be perceived as exotic."[19] When Danny receives a letter from Thandiwe, his classmates make ape and bird sounds, unable to view her apart from animalistic stereotypes that inform their perception of her race.

Thandiwe's divergence from her peers is not only due to her race, it relies on having lived outside of Australia and having a worldly sophistication that is revealed in her tastes and overt sexuality. Both her physical body and intellectual curiosity are disruptive to the students and the school authorities. Thandiwe's unique physical appearance means that she is enticing to some males, but repulsive to others, and for most of the film she is ostracized by the female students. Thandiwe's interests in world events are contrasted with her peers' excitement over new albums. These multiple forms of dissimilarity separate her from the girls in her dormitory; they look down on her racial and national origins, judge her sexual confidence, and are resentful of her haughty intelligence.

Thandiwe's serious nature and presumed self-importance cause her to be unpopular with her white female dorm-mates; they mock her Ugandan background as a way of treating her as inferior. As Thandiwe sits across from a small television screen watching news of the conflict in Vietnam, behind her, three girls congregate around a record player and raise the volume on a rock 'n' roll song to drown out sounds from the TV. The camera shifts from the girls in the background, swaying to the music, to Thandiwe's increasing frustration. Quickly rising from her chair, Thandiwe rushes to the record player and shuts it off, chastising the girls for not taking an interest in world events. As argument ensues, in which one girl sarcastically quips, "They are

[19] Barber.

certainly not going to mention Uganda," emphasizing her distaste with Thandiwe and her home country.[20] Another haughtily chimes in, with a look of disgust, "I've never heard it mentioned ever."[21] The girls continue to denigrate her homeland, remarking, "They're not even in the Olympic games, are they? They're not eligible," [22] as the camera centers on Thandiwe's stoic expression. Eventually, the commentary becomes racial and again equates an African country and its people with animals: "They would be for the zoo Olympics."[23] Soft laughter ensues. On hearing this, Thandiwe rushes to the record player and scratches the record before leaving the room.

Thandiwe is repeatedly contrasted with her white Australian classmates and portrayed as a perpetual outsider. Her African ancestry constructs her as inherently distinct and deviant. Thandiwe is also willing to transgress the school's rules and the social norms for teen girls. For instance, the school emphasizes decorum and refraining from sexual activity, but Thandiwe challenges these rules from the start. Her classmates' petty jealousy and misinformed ideas about Africa magnify Thandiwe's differences and cause her to remain excluded from most social groups. However, she remains dignified despite her peers' attempts at embarrassing her, or authorities admonishing her.

Despite being sixteen years old, Thandiwe's body is objectified in ways that have historically been used on screen to emphasize the alleged hyper-sexuality and sexual deviancy of black and mixed-race women. A short clip of Thandiwe and her roommate getting ready for the dance highlights their budding sexuality and juxtaposes their dissimilar skin colors and levels of

[20] *Flirting*.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

self-confidence. The scene opens with sultry jazz music and Thandiwe's bare leg slipping into a light blue stocking. The camera quickly scans Thandiwe's body clad only in white lace undergarments, from her leg, to her crotch, to her abdomen, to her chest, finally focusing on her face as she slowly looks up. The sequence of events is repeated with her roommate as she pulls on white stockings; however, the camera spends less time on the roommate's body, and emphasis on her chest is mitigated by a bra that is much less revealing than Thandiwe's. As if in competition, Thandiwe's roommate looks at her defiantly and mimics her motions as they give long glances at one another while adjusting their dresses. The camera then rests on Thandiwe as she picks up a lipstick from atop her Leo Tolstoy and Karl Marx reader and seductively applies a thick layer of bright red; for several seconds, her open lips fill the screen. The subsequent close-up of Thandiwe's eyes reflects her cool demeanor. The same shot of lipstick application is mimicked by her roommate, but she applies a less vibrant color and there is less emphasis on her open mouth. In this scene—as in the rest of the movie—is no mistaking that the baby-faced Thandiwe is a teen (as Newton was during filming); however, the camera angles, lighting, and music invite the audience to interpret her smug attitude as indicators of sexual maturity stemming from her race and its presumed inherent sexual nature.

Thandiwe's self-assurance and unwillingness to conform to social norms are represented as part of her racial deviancy and result in her being punished in a way that reaffirms white over black racial hierarchies. After arriving at the school dance and learning her date, Danny, was not able to attend, Thandiwe orchestrates his escape from study hall to the wide-eyed surprise of his classmates. Though she merely wants to spend the night talking, the two must evade teachers and other students, leading to the couple hiding out in Danny's dorm and in the boys' shower. There, Thandiwe is not shy about peeking under the shower stall to get a glimpse of the naked boys. Her

risk-taking eventually lands her and her classmates in trouble with the dance chaperones, but her clever excuse for leaving the premises results in a much lighter punishment than if she was caught with Danny. However, the principal condemns Thandiwe for letting down her country, making her into a representative of all Ugandans by virtue of her nationality and ethnicity. Since Uganda is considered inferior to Australia, Thandiwe is held to high standards of decorum to show that she belongs at Cirencester. The principal links Thandiwe's punishment to her race: she will be a maid to the older students. This evokes unequal power relations between whites and blacks. In the role of "the help," Thandiwe takes on a subservient role common to black women on and off screen. Her racial inferiority is highlighted as she cleans for the white teen girls and is threatened with additional work if her first attempts are not satisfactory.

Despite punishment, Thandiwe continues to defy school rules and gender-based expectations as she attempts to forge connections with Danny, behavior which represents her as enticing and disruptive. As part of Danny's coming of age, he wrestles with uneasy desire for Thandiwe.[24] Though the majority of Thandiwe and Danny's time together is spent attempting conversation and evading classmates, details of her evening further highlight her precocious nature. Thandiwe goes to Danny's room and even sits on his bed. Her lack of shame emphasizes her self-confidence and refusal to be bound by social conventions. She is mature for her sixteen years, and she divulges to Danny, "I doubt I'll ever find anyone complex enough to keep me interested."[25] Such assertions make her appear older and differentiate her from her peers. Danny's roommate, Gilby, criticizes Thandiwe for pursuing of Danny, attributing her advances

[24] See Reid, 116. Thandiwe's "function in this film is to provide Danny (and the audience who identifies with Danny) a coming-of-age."

[25] Ibid.

to a lack of self-control and advanced sexuality that go hand-in-hand with her African ancestry.[26] Thandiwe and Danny ultimately end their first evening together with Thandiwe chastely kissing Danny's cheek. However, Danny's classmates taunt him and give him unsolicited sex advice. Gilby states, "I know body language and hers says, 'give me.' They can be pretty, you know, desperate, these black women."[27] His follow-up remark, "Look at National Geographic,"[28] hints that Thandiwe is innately different, wild, and unrefined, the same way that he views Africa.

The emphasis on Thandiwe's precocious sexuality and the way the white male students exoticize her portray mixed and black women as overly and inherently sexual. Thandiwe is in charge during physical interactions with Danny. Vincent Canby writes, "Ms. Newton is delightful as Thandiwe, who is far more sophisticated than Danny and wise enough never to let him know it."[29] While there is mutual infatuation, Thandiwe leads the conversation, whether discussing her damaged family and the political unrest in Uganda, or commenting on the sexual acts the two will engage in. Observing their budding relationship, it is obvious to Thandiwe's friends that she will determine if they sleep together. Thandiwe's self-assuredness is a strong contrast to Danny's tentativeness. Her friend remarks, "She can control him, but can she control herself?" implying an inherent illicit quality about Thandiwe.[30] Unlike most of the characters, Thandiwe is shown in multiple scenes where she is sexualized, discussing sex, or engaging in sexual behavior.

---

[26] See Mark A. Reid, "Black Women and Interracial Love," in *Post Negritude Visual and Literary Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997). Thandiwe's precocious sexuality, which the boys view as deriving from her racial background, is commentary on the belief that black women are overly and inherently sexual.

[27] *Flirting.*

[28] Ibid.

[29] Vincent Canby, "Review/Film; First Love and Sarte, As a Youth Grows Up," *The New York Times,* November 6, 1992, accessed September 28, 2016.

[30] *Flirting*.

Thandiwe's take-charge nature with Danny, penchant for pushing the social conventions of female teens, and comfort with her sexuality are again emphasized when she and Danny meet during the night at an abandoned cottage. While Danny is awkward and anxious, Thandiwe is at ease discussing their mutual states of arousal. After Thandiwe tells Danny about a current crisis in Uganda and her fear for her father's safety, she seats herself in dim room in front of a crackling fireplace. Danny joins her, sitting close enough so their knees touch. After initial uncertainty about what the two will do, Thandiwe asks, "Do you mind if we just kiss and touch a bit and leave it at that?"[31] Danny says, "Sure," in a quiet voice, and the camera closes in on just his face, the crackle of burning wood providing the only sound.[32] The camera then switches to a close-up of Thandiwe's face as his hand lightly moves over her cheek, down to her shoulder, and under her cardigan sweater along her breast. She appears rather serious as Danny touches her until she guides his hand under her plaid skirt and, with a brief smile, says, "Welcome."[33] She then proceeds to reach under Danny's coat and into his slacks. Her hand is shown moving up and down as she remarks, "Women's clothes are much better designed for this sort of thing."[34] Soon, their touching results in Danny's orgasm. He awkwardly apologizes, "Sorry, I'm so . . ." and trails off, not sure of what to say. Thandiwe self-assuredly responds, "Sticky? We both are," indicating her own arousal from Danny's touch and her comfort with it.[35] Thandiwe's curiosity, easy-going nature about sex, and confidence in directing the couple's interactions construct her as more sexually advanced then Danny.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

Thandiwe's part-black ancestry, female gender, sexual relationship with a white male, and outsider status replicate the on-screen trend of portraying black and mixed black women as exotic and deviant when in relationships with white men.[36] Her brashness, sexual maturity, and hold over Danny paint her as a temptress. Thandiwe and Danny consummate their relationship after Thandiwe orchestrates a way for them to spend a night together before she must return to Uganda. Leaving a day early for her trip home, Thandiwe meets Danny at a motel in town. When school administrators catch them in bed, Thandiwe's confidence with her sexuality is reaffirmed; she is neither apologetic, nor embarrassed. Rather, she is annoyed that she must dress and leave.

As is common with portrayals of interracial relationships, the film concludes with Thandiwe and Danny being forced apart indefinitely; there is no chance for a conventional relationship, and they are further penalized by their loss of innocence when they leave school. Though Duigan attempts to use this film to critique racial segregation in Australia, he winds up reaffirming that interracial relationships cannot succeed and that racial transgressions should be punished. Though their sexual indiscretions are the cause of Danny being sent home from boarding school (punishment), Thandiwe's father had already withdrawn her from school to return to Uganda (proof that the relationship could not have succeeded anyway).

Ifeany writes that it is common for portrayals of on-screen interracial relationships to revolve around "a plot that's completely contingent upon two lovers overcoming the insurmountable obstacle of being from different 'worlds'."[37] After the two say good-bye,

---

[36] See Robert W. Pineda-Volk, "Exploring the 'Tragic Mulatto' Stereotype through Film History," *National Social Science Association*, n.d., accessed July 25, 2015, http://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-12.htm. "There are a number of ways in which the legacy of the tragic mulatto remains in contemporary cinema. One way is the prevalence of the white male lens. In nearly every Hollywood movie depicting interracial romance, a white male is coupled with a nonwhite female, in opposition to the national trend. In terms of African Americans, she is light-skinned, relatively thin, and sensual - the exotic other. Notable examples include such films as *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Zebrahead* (1992), *Monster's Ball* (2001), *Bullworth* (1998), and the current *Something New* (2006)."

[37] K. C. Ifeanyi, "The Last Taboo: Will Smith, 'Focus,' and Hollywood's Interracial Couples Problem," *Fast Company*, March 2, 2015, accessed July 16, 2015.

Thandiwe is stoic as she turns away from Danny and enters the principal's car; as it begins to move, she leans out of the window and comments on their impending geographic separation. Referencing Australia, she exclaims, "You keep this half of the world going."[38] Danny responds, "You look after the other,"[39] in reference to Uganda's distance from his homeland. The good-byes reiterate that the two are literally from two distinct worlds, and due to their age, nationalities, the instability of Uganda, reuniting may be impossible.

Although it is a comedy, *Flirting* concludes on a somber note as Thandiwe and Danny pay for their sexual transgressions. The premature end to their high school years means social isolation, the loss of each other, and growing up fast. While both lose their relatively carefree school days, the outcome for Thandiwe represents a more intense punishment for her multiple forms of illicit behavior. She is sent to warring Uganda, whereas Danny returns to his family's farm and works at his father's pub. The repeated hardships Thandiwe endures in Uganda are tremendous: her stepmother disappears, her father is executed. As Thandiwe and Danny communicate by letter, the distance between the couple is emphasized using images of political demonstrations and brutal deaths in Uganda that are juxtaposed with Danny's relative solitude. To Danny, Thandiwe is from another world; she has experiences he can barely comprehend. When her letters stop, he fears she is dead. Finally, a letter arrives letting Danny know that Thandiwe still thinks about him, but the film ends with the two remaining in different parts of the world.

Portraying Thandiwe as a marginalized and exotic figure because of her disparate mixed identity is a common way of depicting racially mixed female characters. Thandiwe was a racial and national outsider and was consequently highly sexualized. She was also desirable in a way

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

that is uncommon for single-race black and African American characters. Her part-English background and cosmopolitan lifestyle gave her some cultural similarity to the white students, but at times separated her by presenting her as more sophisticated. Though depicted in a depraved manner due to the way her male peers conceived of Africans, Thandiwe was also depicted as having some European racial and cultural ties that distinguished her from the uncivilized characteristics the classmates associated with Africans. Finally, as a mixed character, Thandiwe was constructed using familiar on-screen tropes. Analyzing the way that mixed action heroines' desirability relies on their multiple races, Jeffrey A. Brown writes that their "value as mixed race women is not perceived as their ability to pass, but in being able to signify a tempered exotic otherness."[40]

Like Thandiwe, Newton had a fraught identity as a mixed African and British teen; she was "an anomaly" and lacked a place of belonging.[41] Similar to Thandiwe's isolation at Cirencester, Newton's dissimilarities made her feel separate from her peers her during her school years: "I was the Black atheist kid in the all-white school run by Catholic nuns."[42] Off screen and when playing Thandiwe, Newton considered herself a "noticeable nobody" as she underwent the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility common of racial minorities.[43] Thandiwe's marginalization due to her non-conforming Ugandan nationality and mixed African race mirrors Newton's youth when she was "defined by otherness" and deemed "other before I was anything else."[44]

---

[40] Jeffrey A. Brown, *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture* (University, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

[41] Newton.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

Playing the Tragic Mulatta

As Sally Hemings in the semi-fictional drama *Jefferson in Paris* (1995), Newton played a historical tragic mulatta: a desirable mixed-race woman in bondage who sacrifices her own freedom for her white lover and their future children. In this movie, Sally is a maid and cares for Jefferson's (Nick Nolte) children. Her beauty and flirtatiousness cause Jefferson to take notice of her and treat her kindly. Despite residing in Paris, where slavery is illegal, Sally's race and former slave status in Virginia mean that Jefferson never sees her as a truly free woman. However, Sally's part-white identity is well-known in Jefferson's house; she is his deceased wife's half-sister, yet she is only allowed to wait on Jefferson or be taken to his bed. He does not acknowledge a relationship between them or plan to free her until her brother, James, demands eventual freedom if she returns to Virginia. While turn-of-the-twenty-first-century historians such as Annette Gordon-Reed describe Sally as a dignified woman who was a partner to Jefferson, the film presents her as early turn-of-the-nineteenth century newspaper articles did: an illicit mistress and silly teenager.[45] Roger Ebert writes that Newton, playing Sally, was a "caricature of an ingratiating slave."[46]

Newton only appears in half of the film, but by including Sally, director James Ivory incorporates mixed-race individuals whose stories are often left out of the historical narrative of the United States. However, instead of constructing Sally as dignified, Ivory uses the character to connect racially mixed women and illicit sexual behavior.[47] Sally and James were born as half-

[45]See Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997).

[46] Ebert, "Jefferson in Paris."

[47] For reviews on the film see: Edward Guthmann,"'Jefferson' Gets Lost in Paris/Merchant-Ivory Keep Audience After Class in History Lecture," *SFGate*, April 7, 1995, accessed June 23, 2017, http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Jefferson-Gets-Lost-in-Paris-Merchant-Ivory-3037777.php. The Guardian's

siblings of Jefferson's deceased wife, Martha, due to an affair between Sally's mother and Jefferson's father-in-law. Despite their part-white identity, their black identity condemned them to the status of property (slavery), and were inherited by Jefferson as a wedding present. Sally's eventual choice to either return to slavery in order to live in Virginia with Jefferson, or to remain in Paris with James without a means of supporting herself and no French language skills, emphasizes her precarious position as mixed black woman. By returning to Virginia, Sally makes an extraordinary sacrifice for Jefferson as she consents to her enslavement and that of all of her future children for a minimum of twenty-one years.

Despite the rigid racial classifications and laws of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that deemed mixed race unequivocally black, part of Sally's desirability came from her also being racially and culturally white. Due to living in Paris, away from the American slave system, and her duties of caring for Jefferson's children, Sally was regularly in close quarters with him and his family. She was given jewelry and material to make clothing, which helped her to dress fairly similarly (minus the plunging necklines on Sally's frocks, emphasized by close-ups) to Jefferson's own teenage daughter, Patsy (Gwyneth Paltrow). Sally's lighter skin and features also emphasized her similarity to whites. Finally, due to slavery being illegal in Paris, neither whites who worked in Jefferson's house, nor his guests, treated her as a slave. Only Patsy, who had grown up with slavery in Virginia, reminded Sally of her inferior status.

As Sally, Newton embodied a representation of mixed race that was fixed as solely black and, more importantly, equated with being a slave. Due to the way that race was legally and socially constructed at the time, Sally lacked freedom over her own body and fundamental rights outside of France. Being known as property of the Jefferson family also caused the real Hemings

---

Alex Von Tunzelman gave *Jefferson*, "Entertainment Grade: D and History Grade: C-." Ebert added, the "film doesn't answer hard questions."

to be racially classified as black, despite appearing part white. However, once leaving the South and relocating to the North, Hemings' race was not viewed in the same way. Toward the end of her life, in the free state of Ohio, Hemings transcended her African race when she was marked as white on the 1830 census. What was considered black based on status, location, proximity to others, the law, time period, and appearance could be represented and understood differently even within the same mixed-race person.

Despite not being a lead character in *Jefferson*, Newton's role as Sally depicts what the controversial Jefferson-Hemings relationship might have looked like, highlights the instability of racial categories, and is a problematic depiction of Sally despite the director's inclusion of her as a way to counter racism. Acknowledging Hemings' role in Jefferson's life also revises American history. *Jefferson* was released just prior to the public announcement of DNA evidence matching one of Hemings' children to Thomas Jefferson. This alteration of a former President's history renewed national interest in the Jefferson-Hemings relationship. The new Jefferson-Hemings story—and Ivory's cinematic version of it—place a mixed-race and black female experience into what has long been considered the white American history of a white American family. Yet, critics such as Even Zibart of *The Washington Post* deemed *Jefferson* "thoughtlessly racist" and fault the film for leaving out any critique of Jefferson for turning Sally into his mistress.[48] Edward J. Gallagher also remarks on the film's lack of commentary on race and argues, "The film has nothing substantive to say about race; in fact, it may be racist."[49]

While *Jefferson* emphasizes how mixed-race individuals were treated during Hemings' lifetime, Sally's character reaffirms the racism both of that time period and at the time of the

[48] Eve Zibart, "Jefferson in Paris." *The Washington Post*, April 7, 1995, accessed March 24, 2017.

[49] Edward J. Gallagher, "Reel American History: Films – Jefferson in Paris," Lehigh University Digital Library, n.d., accessed March 24, 2017, http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reel_new/films/list/0_55.

film's creation. Zibart writes, "Sally is a simple-minded and sometimes sly flirt."[50] Gallagher concurs, "Sally makes you think of pickaninnies . . . of racial caricatures."[51] Ivory's inclusion of Sally gives credence to her significance in Jefferson's life, but by portraying her as unintelligent and relying on stereotypes, he gives credence to Jefferson historians who refuse to believe Hemings played a role in his life beyond short-term mistress. Ivory denies the possibility of Sally having had influence over the former President, and his depiction of her includes racist and sexist undertones. Sally is also tragic, because she is portrayed as unable to see beyond her feelings for Jefferson and feels safer living as a slave in Virginia with Jefferson than facing an unknown but free life in France with James.

As Sally, Newton plays a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century problematic reimagining of a tragic mulatta figure. Sally embodies the main points of the trope: she is pitiful, deviant, conflicted, born of an illicit affair, and devoid of familial connections (aside from James). However, instead of merely a sympathetic character, Ivory created a caricature. Ivory's construction reveals underlying racism, as his portrayal of Sally is partially informed by racially derived stereotypes that emphasize the intellectual inferiority of slaves and people of color in subservient roles. Due to the paucity of mixed-race historical figures whose lives make it to the big screen, in playing Sally, Newton, as a mixed-race performer, has a rare opportunity to play a mixed-race character Yet, in spite of this opportunity, she plays a role that reveals white male directors' persistent unease with portraying racially mixed female characters.

Mixed race as Positive and Detached from Racial Identity

[50] Zibart.

[51] See Zibart. See also Gallagher.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, on the brink of the multicultural millennium and what was expected to be a post-race era, some of Newton's characters shifted from tragic to positive representations of mixed race, detached from specific racial identities. In 2000, Newton won the featured role of Nyah Nordoff-Hall in *M:I-2* (*Mission Impossible II*). Film critics and news media deemed her character and relationship with male lead, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), exemplary of color-blind casting and the elimination of racial barriers on screen. Similar to romantic comedies, large-budget action-thrillers prior to *M:I-2* did not regularly cast interracial black-white couples in lead roles. What's more, action films that did feature interracial couples routinely omitted love scenes. However, due to beliefs that racial categories were losing significance, that race was no longer life-altering, and that the celebration of mixed people that was occurring, *M:I-2*, because it featured Newton, was represented as proof that in popular culture, "the tensions of the past are beginning to ease."[52]

Film critics such as Siegel viewed the lack of significance attached to Nyah's race as a major change in the way mixed actresses were perceived on screen. He writes that audiences likely read Nyah as non-white due to her being played by Newton, but in the current climate of racial tolerance, "race is never mentioned" and "no one seems to mind."[53] Since the first *Mission Impossible* starring Cruise generated huge box-office revenue, it was almost certain that audiences would line up for the sequel regardless of the rest of the casting; Newton as the lead female in *M:I-2* did not negatively impact the film in terms of earnings or critical reception.[54]

Despite being known as a mixed black actress, Newton could play a lead role in this film and go against norms for the genre as long as her character was not attached to a racial

[52] Siegel.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid. "The film earned nearly $100 million in its first six days . . . and is going to become the year's first $200 million smash."

background. Nyah is racially unmarked and underdeveloped, and her romantic relationship is not the central narrative. Ebert wrote, "Thandie Newton plays the woman and the most significant thing about her character is that she is still alive in the end."[55] Nyah could have been played by an actress of any racial background, since Newton's own black and mixed race was deemed by Matthews "an irrelevant detail in every particular except for its casting audaciousness."[56] Unlike a romantic comedy, Nyah's relationship does not include an imminent wedding or family involvement that could bring racial concerns into the film. The "action-fluff"[57] nature of the film that Ebert claims "marries minimal character development to seamless action"[58] means that Nyah and her romantic relationship lack depth; she and her interactions with Ethan exist for purely aesthetic appeal and excitement.

Nyah and Ethan represented a marked change in the visual appearance of on-screen couples and were celebrated for the way they looked rather than their acting; in this way, the superficially attractive couple was able to distract from the film's poorly crafted plot and use of ostentatious effects.[59] Despite their racial difference, Newton's attractiveness helped the pairing from being problematic. Bailey argues that cast alongside Cruise, "the color of her skin was less important than the fact that the two stars looked beautiful together."[60] While some reviews included limited discussion of Newton's character, others focused solely on the problems with *M:I-2*'s over-the-top plot. Finally, while Newton's casting made headlines for depicting a major

---

[55] Roger Ebert, "Mission: Impossible II," *RogerEbert.com*, May 24, 2000, accessed October 16, 2016.

[56] Matthews.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ebert.

[59] See Dennis Harvey, "Review: 'Mission: Impossible 2," *Variety*, May 24, 2000, http://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/mission-impossible-2-2-1200462090/. "M:I 2 pushes the envelope in terms of just how much flashy packaging an audience will buy when there's absolutely nada inside."

[60] Frankie Y. Bailey, "Screening Stereotypes," in *Women, Violence, and the Media: Readings in Feminist Criminology*, ed. Drew Humphries (Lebanon: Northeastern University Press, 2009), 75–98.

change in Hollywood films, she was also awarded the "Worst Supporting Actress" by the Golden Raspberry Awards for her limited role.[61] The negative reviews of the film and the flat depiction of Nyah meant that while Newton's role was historically significant, she was also largely eye candy, as was most of the film. Written to be primarily a physically appealing sidekick, Nyah did not need to be complex.

Nyah is free from the racial burdens that plagued Newton's early film characters, yet she is constructed similarly to other stereotypical mixed-race characters in that her identity is derived from her sexual appeal and unique physicality. Nyah's beauty is her most significant quality—a fact which many reviewers point out. Cathy Booth writes, "Race isn't an issue in *M-I:2*. Newton's character is just a beautiful woman in a short skirt straddling Tom Cruise in a bath tub."[62] David Duprey writes that, despite being "smart, witty, cunning, and an exceptionally talented thief . . . Ethan only needs her for her other um assets"[63] and that, "when she realizes what stakes are involved, she agrees to be his eye candy, er bait."[64] Duprey, like the film's director John Woo, depicts Nyah as the idealized beautiful action heroine without taking into account or defining her by race. "She's a busty, drop-dead gorgeous model type."[65]

Nyah's physical attractiveness can be taken for granted because she, as well as Newton, fit the expectation and norm for mixed-race black women paired with white male leads. According to Kellina Craig-Henderson, these are "physically attractive women possessing at

---

[61] See "The Razzies,*" The Golden Raspberry Awards (Razzie®) Awards, LLC,* 1980–2017, accessed May 18, 2017, http://www.razzies.com/.

[62] Cathy Booth, "Thandie Makes it Possible," *Time,* June 12, 2000, accessed March 30, 2017, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,46557,00.html.

[63] David Duprey, "That Moment in Mission: Impossible II (2000): A Personal Betrayal," *That Moment In*, March 18, 2015, accessed March 30, 2017.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

least some combination of mainstream beauty constants."[66] Since Nyah has a racially ambiguous look, her difference from conventional whiteness or a singular black appearance gives her an identity where her blackness is appealing. Rajani Sudan writes that Nyah is "breathtakingly beautiful."[67] He describes her embodiment of black and white as "blackness turns beautiful (on the big screen) when straight noses, straight hair, and thinner lips are superimposed on the black face."[68] Nyah's white ancestry helps her fit the desired image for black females: on screen, they must be racially mixed with obvious white features.

Similar to Nyah, most mixed-race characters played by Newton are constructed in ways that cause their identities to be intertwined with beauty and sexualized. Since these characters have appearances that are distinct but also adhere to some Western standards of beauty, they are meant to be almost as alluring as white women. Missouri writes, "The stereotype of the tragic mulatto in Hollywood film is one of the black woman who possesses the socially accepted desirability of the white woman because of her mixed ancestry, which is seen as both a blessing and a curse in the American imagination."[69] On screen, whiteness has long been equated with beauty. For mixed-race actresses, especially those who have black ancestry, the criteria for attractiveness is light skin and European features. Missouri lists "mixed-race Halle Berry and other black women of lighter hue" as "appropriate for the male gaze as constructed by Hollywood film."[70] Yet, even these physical markers of whiteness do not entirely elevate black actresses, or the characters they play, to the status of white women. Missouri writes, "No amount

[66] Kellina Craig-Henderson, "Beauty, Sexualization, and Race," in *Black Women in Interracial Relationships: In Search of Love and Solace* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 100.

[67] Rajani Sudan, "Girl Erupted," in *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture*, eds. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 355–372.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Montré Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex, and Afro-Religiousity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 6.

[70] Ibid., 7.

of white beauty is able to negate the conventional subordinate positioning of black women."[71] Thus, many of Newton's characters, including Nyah, are represented in one or more of the following ways: as lustful, as outsiders, or in need of discipline.

Illicit sexual behavior, sexual abuse, and rape also continually informed Newton's well-known mixed characters. For Newton, portraying mixed race is regularly equated with embodying the epitome of beauty and performing highly sexual behavior. Race and sexuality are intertwined in ways that conflate mixed race with inherent sexual qualities that rely on antiquated but relatively common stereotypes. Like Nyah, these characters are flat. However, unlike the irrelevant nature of Nyah's race, most mixed characters, like Newton herself, do not escape the burdens of their mixed identity and black race.

The Twenty-First Century Tragic Figure

Crash (2005) is set in the early twenty-first century in a fictional Los Angeles where people constantly encounter others outside of their racial and social demographics and must decide how to navigate tense interactions.[72] *Crash* reveals fractures in race relations and blatant as well as unconscious racism that persists in the present. Instead of adhering to the post-racial promise of the millennium, characters of various racial backgrounds reveal deep-seeded prejudices when they encounter individuals of other races. The film suggests that there is still a long road to travel before racial differences cease to matter and racism is over. Director and screenwriter Paul Haggis also attempts to provide a new spin on racial intolerance, as biases in the film do not adhere to traditional white-versus-black (or minority) races, but people of every

[71] Ibid.

[72] *Crash*, directed by Paul Haggis (Lions Gate Films, 2005), DVD.

background are involved in racially motivated behavior or violence.[73] Moreover, victims can become aggressors, and even the most damaged can be redeemed.

In a series of vignettes, characters of different racial or cultural backgrounds literally collide over the course of a day and half in Los Angeles. Most of the interactions, from tense and violent to heroic, reaffirm an individual character's racial biases, while many of the exchanges between whites and people of color reiterate the norm of white superiority, and excuse it. While attempting to portray everyone as equally to blame for racially derived judgments and behavior, Grierson writes that Haggis "never claimed to solve racism with *Crash*, but his movie did something almost as offensive: reduced a societal ill to a narrative device."[74] Haggis also redeems the film's most racist white male character, despite his victimization of a mixed black woman. Most whites in the film are portrayed as heroic or deserving of sympathy. Haggis constructs white characters as able to be excused for their failures. They can also be transformed, but in the process, non-white characters pay a price.

Newton plays Christine Thayer, a light-skinned, presumably mixed African American women who is sexually desired and then violated by a racist white cop, Officer John Ryan (Matt Dillon); later he saves her from imminent death and transforms into a complex and sympathetic character despite his past transgressions. Christine is comprised of elements of a modern and historical burdened mixed woman. She is assertive and proud of her race, but does not escape being "sexualized" and "doomed" in ways that J. E. Smyth writes were prevalent in classically constructed characters.[75] Christine is quick-tempered, confident, and constructed as hyper-

[73] "Crash," *Lions Gate Entertainment*, 2005, accessed October 2, 2016.

[74] Tim Grierson, "Is *Crash* Truly the Worst Best Picture?" *New Republic*, February 24, 2016, accessed March 14, 2017.

[75] J. E. Smyth, "Classical Hollywood and the Filmic Writing of Interracial History, 1931-1939," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 23–44.

sexualized, but she is distinct from most African American characters; as part of the upper class, she believes she has transcended racial and social boundaries. However, her sexual and racial deviancy result in her being violently "put in her place" by Officer Ryan gratuitously searches her body in front of her husband, Cameron Thayer (Terrance Howard). Officer Ryan's treatment of Christine and Cameron reinforces racial—white over black—and gender—male over female—hierarchies, and reinforces the degraded status of mixed black women as they are punished for their illicit background and beauty. Ultimately, the social power Officer Ryan has over Christine, in his role as a white male police officer, place her at the mercy of his decisions.

Officer Ryan is constructed as the film's most complex character:[76] his severe flaws are meant to be part of his "human frailties of frustration and anger" rather than deep-seeded racism or misogyny.[77] In "Talking Trash: a Dialogue about Crash," bell hooks writes, "No other character is constructed with such dynamism."[78] hooks views Officer Ryan to be "cast as the hero" and "the only character to rise above personal limitations, personal prejudices," and in "his moment of glory . . . like all Hollywood heroes . . . his sins are forgiven and he is allowed to continue domination over others."[79] Prior to his encounter with the Thayers, he is shown caring for his ill father who has suffered loss indirectly because of racial minorities, and then arguing with an unsympathetic African American insurance rep over his father's claims. Officer Ryan is presented as working class, a good citizen, caring, and compassionate, but he resents African Americans because of negative personal encounters. His difficulty helping his father, coupled with his lack of financial wealth, motivate his mistreatment of the upper-middle-class Thayers.

---

[76] Matt Dillon was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role for his portrayal of Officer John Ryan.

[77] bell hooks, *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 102.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., 102–103.

He stops them knowing their SUV is not the one he was looking for, but justifies it by assuming he can find a legitimate reason for the stop. His motivations reveal turn-of-the-twenty-first-century racially motivated behavior by white police officers toward blacks that, in many instances—including this encounter—leads to violence.

Officer Ryan is not merely a corrupt white cop; he is also given the chance to prove his humanity, which gives viewers the opportunity to feel compassion for him in ways that are denied to most of the troubled characters in the film. Hero narratives are common in Hollywood, and hooks deems character arcs such as Officer Ryan's part of "a long line of racialized Hollywood narratives from *Birth of a Nation* to present-day films in which the themes and plots are centered on white male triumph over bestial emotions. . . . It is the film narrative audiences have come to expect."[80] Officer Ryan's fall, represented by his abuse of authority and physical power over the Thayers, and his redemption, represented by his risking his life to save Christine's, give him complexity that other characters lack. Yet, his turning points and heroism come at the expense of black female dignity. hooks writes

> When people of color are cast in many Hollywood narratives, they are oftentimes used as props that hold up this hero . . . sealing and normalizing a system of ideas and practices of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The hero becomes the great white hope or savior.[81]

Officer Ryan's redeems himself by saving Christine, a heroic act that represents a common on-screen occurrence of white men saving women of color. Deemed "the White Savior genre," these films portray whites (usually men, but white women can also be "saviors") as

[80] Ibid., 103.

[81] Hooks, 99.

> single-handedly rescuing people of color from their plight. These story lines insinuate that people of color have no ability to rescue themselves. This both makes white audiences feel good about themselves by portraying them as benevolent messiahs… and also depicts people of color as helpless.[82]

Depicting one such storyline, this scene and Officer Ryan's transformation are recycled tropes, prevalent in the present, and familiar and believable to the audience.[83]

As people of different races and backgrounds collide, their interactions shatter some racial stereotypes, while other stereotypes are reinforced in an attempt to show the complexities of racial biases and unconscious racism. Haggis remarked that he "wrote *Crash* to bust liberals" who think they are not racist by depicting how those who believe they are progressive can still hold deeply rooted racist beliefs.[84] This desire was born of Haggis' own experience: he called himself a liberal, but found himself still crossing the street after seeing black men in hoodies walking toward him. Frustrated with his hypocritical behavior, he wanted to expose himself and others like him.[85] As Grierson writes, Haggis' main point in *Crash* is, "hey, everybody's a little bit racist,"[86] but this belittles the institution of racism and attempts to implicate everyone equally. Haggis' vignettes are also commentaries on denying racism as well as "small instances of racism he witnessed,"[87] and his "own racial fears."[88] Often, the characters make a surprise deviation

---

[82] David Sirota, "Oscar Loves a White Savior," *Salon,* February 21, 2013, accessed October 2, 2016.

[83] *Crash* was nominated for six Academy Awards and won three, including Best Motion Picture. Recently, Haggis remarked that *Crash* should not have won Best Picture. See Alan Sepinwall, "Even the Director of 'Crash' Wouldn't Have Voted for it for Best Picture," *Hitflix,* August 11, 2015, accessed November 21, 2015, http://uproxx.com/sepinwall/even-the-director-of-crash-wouldnt-have-voted-for-it-for-best-picture/.

[84] Ryan Buxton, "Paul Haggis: I Wrote 'Crash' to 'Bust Liberals'," *The Huffington Post*, June 9, 2014, accessed February 4, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/19/paul-haggis-crash_n_5511665.html.

[85] Matthew Jacobs, "A Decade After 'Crash,' Paul Haggis Reflects on the Polarizing Racial 'Fable' That Stormed the Oscars," *The Huffington Post*, May 6, 2015, October 3, 2016.

[86] Grierson.

[87] "Movies: Paul Haggis, *Crash*," *BBC*, 2005, accessed February 4, 2016.

from conventional stereotypes. For instance, Anthony (Ludacris) and Peter (Larenz Tate) are initially not potential attackers, but rather the victims of subtle racism, when a white couple (Jean Cabot, played by Sandra Bullock, and racially liberal Rick Cabot, played by Brendan Fraiser) change direction rather than walk by them. Anthony and Peter comment on the racism they endure and are portrayed as sympathetic rather than dangerous figures. However, they are forced back into their original typecasts, black men as criminals, when they carjack the same couple. This scene exposes the Cabots' ingrained racist behavior while also showing it is not always unfounded (as their fears were justified). At other times, racially marked characters strive for parity against glass ceilings, or are punished for stepping outside of prescribed roles. Haggis succeeds in showing that racism does not just exist in those whose actions are obvious; racist behavior can come from those who do not see themselves as racist. Finally, while the blatantly racist characters may transform, as Officer Ryan does, those in denial remain blind to their behavior.[89]

Christine Thayer and her husband Cameron are used to expose Officer Ryan's deepest flaws and to help him redeem himself. The perception of Christine and Cameron by white employers and law enforcement officers shows the ingrained racial prejudice against people of color in the fictional Los Angeles, but also in American society, that was the impetus for the film and the interracial tensions it portrays. While the Thayers surpassed some limitations for African Americans by being racially mixed and having high socioeconomic status, neither is able to fully transcend their skin color. Thus, the Thayers are constructed using the antiquated tragic mulatto/a trope: they are caught between worlds, discriminated due to their black ancestry despite being part white.

---

[88] Buxton.

[89] Matthew Jacobs.

The Thayers suffer racist treatment and humiliation by Officer Ryan that is specifically gendered, related to their mixed race, and reaffirms white hierarchy. When Officer Ryan first approaches the Thayer's vehicle, the glare of the SUV headlights—in combination with Christine's mixed appearance—literally mask Christine's race. Wearing white, with straight hair and light skin, Christine almost appears white. Thus, Officer Ryan initially sees her as a white woman engaging in sexual acts with a black man. As he approaches the SUV, the couple tries to suppress their smiles over getting caught. Cameron is asked to step outside for a sobriety test. Despite not being a drinker, he goes along with the charade, infuriating Christine, who gets out of the SUV. By refusing to stay in the vehicle, Christine sets off a chain of events that leads to Officer Ryan exploiting his role as a law enforcement officer and physically punishing both Thayers for their public sex. Despite the fact that Cameron following the officer's demands, Officer Ryan threatens violence to quiet Cameron while he molests Christine. Fear of retaliation keeps Cameron from attempting to rescue Christine and makes him weak in her eyes. Officer Ryan then disciplines Christine for her sexual behavior by making her submit to a gratuitous body search. The power Officer Ryan displays over the couple, as he reclaims a "white" woman from a "black" man, reinforces white male dominance over black men and women—dominance that persists despite Cameron and Christine being both black *and* white.

Cameron's complacency, despite what appears to be a racially motivated stop, strips him of his masculinity and contrasts with Christine's protest of the unjust treatment and with Officer Ryan's display of hyper-masculinity through the use of power. Repeatedly ignoring Officer Ryan's commands to "stay in the vehicle," Christine's slender leg emerges from the SUV, followed by her long, low-cut white satin dress. Her hair is pulled back, revealing diamond earrings that, along with the SUV and expensive looking dress, emphasize Christine's elevated

class status. She loudly asks, “Who the hell do you think you’re talking to?” As Cameron calmly explains that Christine has been drinking, the camera pans to the empty streets. The low lighting and absence of vehicles or people foreshadow that the unnecessary stop will proceed with the Thayers at the mercy of Officer Ryan. After slamming Cameron unnecessarily roughly against the SUV, Officer Ryan and his partner Tommy restrain Cameron. Christine yells, “Get your hands off him! He hasn’t done nothing wrong.” Officer Ryan demands that she put her hands on her head. Fearful, Cameron asks her, “Will you just do what he says?” Christine, eyes wide and teeth bared, snarls, “Fuck you, Cameron.” As Officer Ryan struggles to restrain Christine, she continues to fight him, shouting “keep your filthy fucking hands off of me . . . fucking pig.” Officer Ryan says, “That’s quite a mouth you have,” and then, turning to Cameron with a knowing look, remarks, “of course you know that,” crudely referencing their earlier sexual acts. Realizing the real reason behind Officer Ryan’s abuse of power, Christine accuses him of being racist and inappropriately desiring her, while at the same time reaffirming that he is of a lower class. “Is that what this is all about? You thought you saw a white woman blowing a black man, that just drove your little cracker ass crazy.” Her refusal to comply infuriates Cameron, as he continues to acquiesce to Officer Ryan. “Will you just shut your fucking mouth?” he screams. Officer Ryan agrees that Christine should listen to Cameron, and his disturbing smile foreshadows the violation about to occur.

The sexual assault of a mixed black woman in front of her mixed black husband reaffirms Officer Ryan’s gender dominance over Christine and white racial dominance over both Thayers. The Thayers’ punishment is motivated by Officer Ryan’s ease at misusing his authority, his desire for Christine, his jealousy of Cameron, and Christine’s refusal to show remorse for her sexual behavior. Restraining Christine, Officer Ryan draws out his search for weapons until he

has ravaged her; in doing this he reclaims his power over her, and Haggis falls into the trope of punishing a mixed black woman for deviant sexuality. Here, Christine is sexually violated in the same way many of Newton's characters have been by white men. The only way to control Christine is physically. Officer Ryan repeatedly pushes her hard against the vehicle, yelling, "Get your legs open." Claiming to need to search thoroughly for weapons despite Christine only wearing a cocktail dress, he places his hands on her bare skin in the side openings of her low-cut dress and runs his hands slowly over her buttocks and legs. The camera closes in on the outline of her lean limbs under her thin satin dress, emphasizing Christine's body and Haggis' inability to separate her from sexual behavior. The camera cuts from Cameron's distress to Christine's humiliation. The camera follows Officer Ryan's hands up Christine's bare legs and under her skirt. A few feet away, Cameron and Tommy look troubled. Clearly, Christine's discipline is much more severe than Cameron's. Despite wanting to critique racist acts, Haggis ties Christine's molestation to her gender, hyper-sexuality, lack of shame, and thus the need for discipline by a white man.

Officer Ryan's racism, resentment of his socioeconomic status, and desire for Christine motivate his abuse. His need to reaffirm his authority over African Americans (due to his previous encounters with the blacks who affected his father's livelihood) is complicated by Christine's attractiveness and his initial misreading of her as white. Because she is black and an assertive woman in a society where black women are not deserving of protection, Haggis portrays Christine as receiving little sympathy from men.[90]

Cameron represents another version of a conflicted mixed-race character; he desires to escape his blackness through career achievements, financial success, and dissimilarity from

[90] See Hutchinson. "The assault of Newton's upper crust buppie black woman is a not so subtle reminder that black women who aspire to the trappings of domesticated protected white middle class femininity are liable to be treated like just another 'ghetto ho.'"

common stereotypes. He is light-skinned, but recognizably black.[91] Hutchinson views Cameron as suffering "a sense of alienation and emasculation as a white-identified black man."[92] Cameron's lifestyle contrasts with the other African Americans in the film. However, he is not permitted to transcend his black ancestry despite being part white and living in white social worlds. When he is mistreated by Officer Ryan, he is degraded for being black, but then he is chastised by Christine for not being black enough because he obeys Officer Ryan, does not put himself at risk to save her, and apologizes despite doing nothing wrong. Similarly, Cameron shies away from challenging white hierarchies in the film industry and desires to be accepted by his boss, Fred (Tony Danza), again submitting to an authority figure in a way that contrasts with stereotypical black masculinity.

Instead of blaming only Officer Ryan for the violation she suffered, Christine also reproaches Cameron and deems his acquiescence to Officer Ryan a lack of masculinity and of blackness.[93] Christine views black masculinity as determined by physical strength, and not deferring to white men. She insinuates Cameron's blackness is not legitimate, but appropriated from TV, by "watching the Cosby Show."[94] Because he lacks a full black identity and lives in white worlds, Christine implies Cameron only understands blackness from pop culture. Cameron is stripped of his blackness and, in turn, his manhood for failing to perform an expected and limited version of African American masculinity. His lack of violent response, his refusal to risk injury to himself, and his inability to keep Christine from being brutalized by a white man

[91] As confirmed by Officer Ryan in Cameron's first scene in the film.

[92] Hutchinson.

[93] See "Movies: Paul Haggis, *Crash*." Haggis admitted he did not think he had the right to be writing about black identity and arguments over authenticity.

[94] *Crash*.

construct him as weak and paint him in stark contrast to the stereotypical, overly physical black male who is unafraid of authority and willing to risk his life for his woman.

When Christine's life is again in danger, Cameron is unable to rescue her and redeem himself. Vulnerable, alone, upside-down, and unable to move from her totaled car, Christine is again a victim, and this time Officer Ryan determines her fate. The second run-in between Christine and Officer Ryan again reproduces the white-over-black hierarchy, as her life is literally in his hands. Christine's body is also the site where Officer Ryan will be excused for his prior brutality.

In this scene, Christine must trust Officer Ryan to survive, and the drawn-out rescue scene shows the two intimately connected in a way that Christine was never shown with Cameron. In determining Christine's fate for the second, Officer Ryan again occupies a position of power that Cameron cannot possess. As Officer Ryan approaches the upside-down SUV, haunting lyrical music adds a dreamlike quality to the traumatic scene. Though Christine fearfully protests and initially rejects his help, Officer Ryan swears he will not hurt her. Instead of the brutal way he handled her previously, this time he is gentle. Telling her that he must reach across her to unbuckle her seatbelt, he purposely pulls Christine's thin maroon skirt down over her bare legs as an act of respect that contrasts with the last time he touched her body. In a highly emotional moment when Christine must have faith in the man who previously abused her, their faces are shown almost touching, she in the upside-down car seat, Officer Ryan underneath her. With only their faces visible, the dripping gasoline, emotionally charged music, and the soft camera focus all contribute to what looks more like a love scene than one of impending disaster. The overturned cars, distraught passengers, and beginnings of fires from spilled gasoline are no longer visible as the focus is inside the SUV. Christine tearfully asks, "Are you really gonna get

me out?" Officer Ryan repeatedly assures her, "I'm gonna get you out." The scene is prolonged; Officer Ryan cannot immediately free her, and they remain intimately connected, face-to-face, with him lying under her.

When the gas leak causes the first explosion, bursts of bright orange and red fill the screen. As a contrast to the slow music, the camera speeds up as Officer Ryan is pulled from the vehicle while Christine fights to break free of the broken glass. As soon as he is free, Officer Ryan dives back into the flames and pulls Christine out, completing the act that reinvents him as a savior. Within seconds, the car explodes into enormous orange flames and black smoke. Away from the fire, Christine collapses into Officer Ryan and sobs; he holds her close, cradles her head in his hands and against his cheek. When the paramedics take Christine from Officer Ryan, neither wants to let go. As the medics assure Officer Ryan that Christine will be okay, sadness and confusion cross his face. As Christine walks into the distance, holding onto the medics for support, he continues watching her, and she turns around for a long glance back at him. The end of the scene shows Officer Ryan still looking toward Christine. Slowly regaining his breath, he remains in a crouched position. A fire truck is in the background to his right, the leftover smoke creates a soft filter, and as the camera pans out, it reveals the blanket that held Christine still in his hand. His heroism and transformation are undeniable.

Similar to Officer Ryan, Cameron is given a chance for redemption at the expense of black characters; however, instead of becoming a savior, he turns on other black men, revealing a class and race divide as well as discomfort with his own identity. Cameron's unease with black identity is apparent when he is carjacked by Peter and Anthony. Peter and Anthony are criminals and represent the hyper-masculinity Cameron lacks.[95] Bilal writes that this is Cameron's turning

[95] Mohammed Bilal, "*Crash*: A Reconstruction of Cameron, Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop," in *Crash Course: Reflections on the Film Crash for Critical Dialogues About Race, Power and Privilege*, eds. Michael

point: "he rises from his 'loss' and 'pain' and gets angry for the first time in the movie, what feels like the first time in his life – angry at the cops, his wife, his boss, his blackness, his whiteness, the muggers, himself."[96] Cameron fights off Peter and Anthony and his masculinity is redeemed. He admonishes Anthony, "You embarrass me. You embarrass yourself,"[97] and chastises the two for embodying stereotypes of African American men as criminals. Cameron is uncomfortable with black being synonymous with crime. His light skin and socioeconomic status afford him social privileges that separate him from men like Peter and Anthony.

Cameron's masculinity and blackness are partially restored, and his complexity is increased when he becomes angry and assertive and uses his relative position of power to humiliate his attackers. Christine, however, is not given a similar opportunity for redemption or shown as complex, leaving her primarily defined by her frustration and need to be saved. By defending himself and demeaning Anthony, Cameron is able to shed his victim status, to a degree. In contrast, Christine never escapes needing a man to save her; the only twist is that it is the man who molested her, and not her husband, who saves her life. Throughout the movie, her fate is determined by Officer Ryan, and he epitomizes the sympathy toward and redemption of white characters that viewers are meant to feel. Christine is placed in peril needing rescue in order to humanize Officer Ryan. As her strength and self-esteem are shattered, Officer Ryan's bravery and selflessness mitigate his past misconduct. Thus, Christine remains inferior to men of both races. Her partial whiteness and elevated socioeconomic status are of little help in a society that permits the routine victimizing of women of color in its efforts to assert white male dominance.

Benitez Jr. and Felicia Gustin (Emeryville, CA: The Institute for Democratic Education and Culture – Speak Out, 2007), 63–67.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

Though Christine is based on tropes particular to mixed race black women, playing Christine, Newton approached many of the struggles this character faced as relating to her own and having qualities applicable among women.[98] Like Christine, Newton's mixed race gives her racial fluidity that is often privileged over a singular black identity; however, it is a burden if construed incorrectly or hyper-sexualized. Christine is perceived as white, but punished when her part-black ancestry is revealed. Similar to Newton, Christine does not want her black ancestry submerged under a mixed or non-racially specific identity. However, due to her distance from a black community, Christine's cultural identity appears white and American upper class. (Newton's identity is also white, but British.) Finally, Newton and her character Christine are victims of sexual exploitation by white men and are lusted after based on their physical appeal and perceived illicit sexuality. Newton's characters, even as teens, are overly sexualized and pay for their deviant conduct. In *Crash* Christine was the victim violent sexual punishment, written by a white male director and enacted by a white male police officer.[99]

A Modern Tragic Mulatta

For many black actresses, appearing in a performance of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) is a means of asserting pride in their black identity. Newton claimed and celebrated her black ancestry by performing in Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* (2010), a film adaptation of Shange's work. In this film, nine black women's lives intersect within New York City's Harlem district. Tangie Adrose/Lady in Orange (Newton), her mother Alice/Lady in White (Whoppi Goldberg), and her

[98] Kam Williams, "Thandie Newton – The Crash Interview."

[99] Jung.

sister Nyla Adrose/Lady in Purple (Tessa Thompson) are sexualized due to their race or suffer sexual abuse. As poor, black, and female, these women's stories are often overlooked.

Despite seeming opposite, Tangie and Christine (*Crash*) are similar in their displays of anger and oppression. Both are coded as having part black and white ancestry, and Newton believably plays these two American mixed-race characters. Similar to many of Newton's characters, Christine and Tangie are constructed as twenty-first-century versions of tragic mulattas: racially mixed women burdened by their conflicting backgrounds, gender, isolation, anger, and beauty. Haggis and Perry depict both characters as victims of sexual abuse, but also punish them for presumed illicit sexuality.[100] Despite taking place in early twenty-first century films, the directors constructed characters that resemble the classic trope, and particularly the excessive sexualization of mixed-race women. Christine and Tangie wear revealing clothing, and much of their screen time is devoted to being the object of male fascination. Yet, they are also what Smyth deems "active survivors;" neither is "passive" or "historically doomed.[101] The directors modernize the trope by depicting these characters as assertive and proud, angry rather than meek, and aware that they did not deserve the abuse they received. However, Tangie differs from Christine in that she suffers more economic and emotional hardships; she lives in poverty, continually fights with her family, and is exceedingly volatile and vengeful. Unlike Christine, who is married, Tangie is promiscuous and emotionally closed off.

Tangie is introduced as conflicted, overly sexual, and disgusted by her male lovers. She appears in her apartment, at a tiny dining table in front of an open window, absorbed in journaling. The camera pans in from the outside, framing the window. Lilac curtains gently blow

[100] Tangie is the product of her mother's rape by a white man. Officer Ryan molests Christine for publicly engaging in oral sex with her husband. See Thea Lim, "The Wormiest of Cans: Who Gets to Be 'Mixed Race?'" *Racialicious*, July 12, 2011, accessed March 18, 2014.

[101] Ibid.

in the breeze, revealing cheap, colorful, mismatched furniture in the shabby apartment. Classical music creates a seemingly tranquil scene. A bed is visible behind a beaded curtain standing in for a door, and a nude black man is shown stepping into his shorts, then approaching Tangie while pulling on a T-shirt. He disrupts Tangie's writing, which changes her mood and the scene; the classical music abruptly ends and is replaced with sounds from the street below. As the man bends down to kiss Tangie, she pulls away and sighs, "I've got a lot of work to do and I can't with a man around."[102] She gestures at him. "Here's your clothes, there's coffee on the stove, paper cup."[103] She moves several feet away, then turns around, revealing her open robe with only underwear beneath, and remarks, "It's been very nice, but I can't see you again . . . you got what you came for, didn't you . . . I'm sure your wife is looking for you."[104] Her guest angrily finishes dressing and calls Tangie a "crazy-ass bitch." A flash of gold on his hand reveals a ring. Smugly leaning against the doorframe, Tangie rolls her eyes as he slams the door. This initial scene sets up Tangie's daily routine: terse conversations, little interaction with others, and wreckless behavior with men.

Despite living among a community of black women in a run-down walk-up in Harlem, Tangie's sexual behavior and lack of regard for others makes her an outcast. Her pride and deep resentment keep her from engaging with anyone aside from through verbal confrontations. Tangie is a flat character whose emotions center on anger and displeasure. An early argument with her neighbor and apartment manager, Gilda (Phylicia Rashad), sets up Tangie as undeserving of sympathy. This interaction reiterates Tangie's illicit sexuality, outsider status, and distance from other women. Tangie emerges from her apartment with uncombed hair and an

[102] *For Colored Girls.*

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

open robe that reveals a black lace negligee—a sharp contrast to Gilda's soft, shoulder-length curls and billowy beige satin pajamas. The camera cuts back and forth as the women spew insults over Tangie's stirring up dust in the hallway. Aggravated, Tangie asserts, "It's dust, it will blow away." Gilda haughtily responds with a tilt of her head, voice dripping with judgment, "Everything don't blow like you." Gilda continues, "You got a lotta men coming to your house." Tangie retorts, "You jealous 'cause you don't have no men coming at all." Moving to within a foot of Gilda, Tangie is smug as she warns, "Your old ass better leave me alone. You have been the bane of my existence since they voted you apartment manager." Contempt covers Gilda's face as Tangie walks across the hall and loudly slams her door shut. Gilda mutters, "I can't stand that heifer, just a tramp, come in here all hours of the day and night with these men." The next time Gilda sees Tangie she is chasing out another man, reinforcing Gilda's judgements, and causing Tangie to further resent Gilda's nosiness.

Tangie's penchant for casual sex transgresses gender norms for women; her solicitations are welcomed by men, but she is shamed and disciplined by these same men when she behaves similarly to them. While working at a bar, Tangie picks up a married man who assumes she is a prostitute. In the next scene, as Tangie pushes him down on her bed, he raises his hands in protest, laughs awkwardly, and worries that he does not have enough money to pay her. As Tangie undresses him, he offers to go to an ATM. Tangie pushes him away, offended at his perception of her. Laughing almost uncontrollably, he responds, "I guess I'm just old fashioned. What kind of woman picks a man up in a bar (more laughing) and brings him back to her house if she's not a hooker?"[105] A few feet away, in a long shot, Tangie is shown zipping up her tight black top before defiantly responding, "One that likes to fuck." The camera closes in on her face

[105] *For Colored Girls.*

behind the blurred beads, softened by the flickering lights from the street below. As she commands him to stop laughing, a flash of pain crosses her face despite her attempt to hide her vulnerability. The director portrays her as undeserving of sympathy when she is mistreated due to her sexual proclivity.

Tangie is chastised for her promiscuity in ways that depict her as dirty, dangerous, and mentally unstable—traits that can be associated with the behavior and sexuality of damaged women locked into their situations. Despite being married and willing to pay for sex, Tangie's guest shames her, saying "This is some sick shit." Though Tangie replies, "You men and your double standards, you can do it but a woman can't," and kicks him out of her apartment, she is further judged when he says she, "does this too often to be healthy." Tangie grabs his arm, comes close to his face, and practically snarls, "Are you saying I have some kind of disease?" As he buttons his shirt and walks toward the front door, he retorts, still laughing, "If it ain't in your body, it's in your head." Here, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic,[106] Tangie is accused of potentially having a sexually transmitted disease. This paints her sexual behavior as not only deviant, but also deadly. Further, Tangie's mental state is questioned because her behavior strays far from what is expected of women. Finally, Tangie is further judged when she chases the man into the hallway while screaming at him, not realizing there is an audience: her sister, Nyla is coming up the stairs, and Gilda is standing in her doorway with a look of disapproval. Tangie's rage intensifies when she sees the spectators, and she demands to know why Nyla is there and then directs the full force of her fury at Gilda. She walks toward Gilda, eyes narrowing, pointing her finger and warning, "Don't say a word." As she and Nyla enter her apartment, she takes the

[106] Two other characters, Joanna Bradmore/Lady in Red and her husband Carl Bradmore find out they are HIV positive. Carl has been hiding his homosexuality from his wife and sleeping with men. Joanna confronts him after she receives the results of her HIV test. Promiscuity is punished by contracting a sexually transmitted disease, or being suspected of having one.

opportunity to get the last word and calls Gilda a bitch. This final moment in the scene reaffirms Tangie's aggressiveness and portrays her as deserving to be ostracized by other women.

Tangie is vengeful not only toward Gilda, but toward her mother and sister, as well, because they have a close relationship, whereas Tangie, like most of the tragic women Newton plays, is isolated. Tangie's seclusion matches on-screen and literary depictions of conflicted mixed women existing on the peripheries of families and communities. Promiscuous sex temporarily fills the void. Dolan critiques Tangie's construction, writing, "Thandie Newton playing Alice's oldest daughter strikes some of the film's falsest notes, partly because her role as a man-hungry but man-hating, emotionally damaged virago is so two-dimensional."[107] As hyper-sexualized and victimized, Tangie reiterates the sad and wretched nature of marginalized mixed-race figures.

Despite being part of a story meant to celebrate the diversity, resiliency, and sisterhood of black women, Tangie, like other mixed-race characters played by Newton, is comprised of exaggerated and antiquated stereotypes of deviant women who need reprimanding.[108] Finding fault with many of *For Colored Girls*' character constructions, the writers of "He Said, She Said: Tyler Perry's Words (in Black Women's Mouths)" argue that if Shange's choreopoem depicts "Black women's empowerment and self-actualization, Perry's version is about pushing Black women to the periphery and centering the pathologies that surround them, making them

[107] Jill Dolan, "For Colored Girls," *The Feminist Spectator*, November 7, 2010, accessed May 3, 2011.

[108] See Brett Johnson, "Did Tyler Perry Pull it Off? 'For Colored Girls' Thandie Newton Weighs In," *Black Enterprise*, November 8, 2010, accessed May 5, 2015. Johnson describes Tangie as a "volatile mix of man-eating sex kitten, take-no-mess mean girl, and recovering abuse victim." See also Richard Prince, "Hatin on 'Colored Girls,'' *The Root*, November 7, 2010, accessed May 15, 2015. Critics concurred that Tangie is more of "a cartoon sexpot," rather than an archetype as the characters were in Shange's version.

interchangeable."[109] This is especially true with his invention of Tangie, and also of Alice (also created by Perry) and Nyla. The three pay deeply for their sexual behavior or being sexualized by men; Tangie in particular is punished by being denied sisterhood for most of the film.

Film critics were outraged over Perry's exceedingly dramatic rendition of *For Colored Girls* and viewed it as degrading Shange's work. Most who pointed out the flaws in Perry's work knew Shange's version was going to be difficult to translate from a stage to the screen.[110] Karen Grigsby Bates wrote, "Critics around the country have mostly rolled their eyes at the notion that filmmaker Tyler Perry could do justice to Ntozake Shange's iconic play."[111] They took issue with Perry's characters and deemed Tangie, who was wholly invented by Perry, to be the most distasteful. However, due to the strong ensemble cast; Perry's fame; the themes in the film that are applicable beyond race and gender; and the film's marketing, the gained a significant audience despite critics advising otherwise.[112] And in fact, the film was moderately successful with African American audiences; they attended the opening weekend's showings, and the film paid for itself within days and foreshadowed profits rather than losses.[113]

---

[109] Adria Y. Goldman, Vanatta S. Ford, Alexa A. Harris, and Natasha R. Howard, eds. "He Said, She Said: Tyler Perry's Words (in Black Women's Mouths)" in *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 101.

[110] See Kirk Honeycutt, "For Colored Girls: Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter,* October 21, 2010, accessed April 9, 2015. The play was "never going to make and easy transition to the screen. . . . Someone needed to put creative sweat into this one, to reach for cinematic solutions to the theatrical challenge. All Perry does is force conventional plots and characters—utter clichés without lives or souls."

[111] Karen Grisby Bates, " 'For Colored Girls' Counts on Fans, Not Critics," *NPR,* November 5, 2010, accessed May 17, 2015. Kim McLarin had concerns about the play being made into a film; when she found out Perry was the director, she was "flat out disappointed."

[112] Breeanna Hare, "Tyler Perry's Latest: For 'Colored Girls' Only?" *CNN,* November 6, 2010, accessed February 10, 2017.

[113] Ibid.

Abusive relationships with men inform many of the characters' storylines, but most find relief in their female friends. Tangie's deviancy, however, bars consolation.[114] Tatiana Lam argues that Perry lacks empathy for Tangie, despite her brutal past, by "continuing to mock her in the present . . . he emotionally prioritizes other women's pain because of its root in rape and domestic abuse . . . the insensitive comic depiction of her pain is gratuitous and cruel."[115] Tangie is narrowly constructed as paralyzed by her anger.[116] Already a disappointment to Alice, Tangie further damages their relationship by refusing Alice and Nyla financial help and risking Nyla's life. Tangie uses the little power she has—money her sister and mother need, beauty that men desire, and the ability to intimidate—to damage others. Consequently, Tangie is denied female support because she (like Perry's male characters) damages other women.

Blinded by jealousy and without empathy, Tangie hurts women that she believes have suffered less than her; these actions reveal Tangie's inability to grow or connect with others. She refuses to help Nyla pay for a safe abortion. When Nyla reluctantly asks Tangie for money, their contrast is acute. Nyla wears a fitted pastel jumper with a flower print, and carries a low-slung purse. Her hair hangs in long, loose curls. She is shy and soft spoken. Tangie, by comparison, wears all black and enormous gold earrings; her clothing emphasizes her sleek lines and hard edges. Nyla is hopeful; Tangie is vengeful. Nyla asks for $300 for college applications, but Tangie is skeptical about the need for that much money. The camera repeatedly cross-cuts between Nyla hovering in the doorway, uneasy around her sister, and Tangie on the couch, rolling her eyes when Nyla mentions her college scholarship. As it hits Tangie that Nyla might

---

[114] See Honeycutt. "The male characters . . . are all sick cartoons, existing only to perpetuate horrors on the women in Perry's particular view, though the women often collaborate in their victimhood."

[115] Tatiana Lam, "For Colored Girls: Discerning the True Pain in Tyler Perry's Melodrama," *Broad Recognition*, December 29, 2010, accessed May 17, 2015.

[116] Jozen Cummings, "'For Colored Girls': Thandie Newton on the Ensemble Cast and No Drama Set," *The Wall Street Journal Speakeasy*, November 4, 2010, accessed May 15, 2015.

be pregnant, she is happy to have found a flaw in her sister. When Nyla says, "Not everyone is like you, Tangie," Tangie deviously remarks, "But you are, little sister," implying illicit sexual behavior is ingrained in them.[117] Tangie taunts Nyla, touches Nyla's flat stomach and asks, "How you gonna go to college like that?" and then "Mama's gonna die, you know it!"[118] She claps her hands, sways and laughs, "I can't wait," joyful over her sister's struggle.[119] Tangie then becomes silent, almost vulnerable as she reveals the fear her own pregnancy caused. However, instead of a change of heart, Tangie's jealousy ensures Nyla will suffer. She gives Nyla information for the location where she had an unsafe abortion and refuses her request for money, telling Nyla, "I didn't have no money for no college, but I wasn't pregnant anymore. . . . I'm not giving you any money."[120] In this way, Perry reaffirms his rigid construction of Tangie and her lack of empathy while furthering his commentary on overly sexual women: he punishes the two for their promiscuity and teen pregnancies, brutalizing their bodies through abortions.

In effect, Perry's sexually deviant characters are neither permitted redemption, nor are they given a break from cycles of violence. Sexual violence surrounds Tangie, Alice, and Nyla, and makes them unable to empathize with one another. After Nyla is shown shivering in pain in a hospital bed, recounting the horror of ending her pregnancy, Alice blames Tangie. Alice rushes to Tangie's apartment, grabs her by the collar of her flimsy peach robe, and pushes her into the doorframe, yelling, "What did you do?" Tangie screams, appearing fragile in Alice's grip. Alice bangs into furniture and fumes, "You are the darkness." The commotion causes Tangie's half-nude suitor to emerge from behind the beaded curtain. This reminder of Tangie's sexual behavior

[117] *For Colored Girls.*

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

causes Alice to threaten to kill him. When Alice and Tangie face off, Alice says, "She could have killed her," referring to Nyla's abortion doctor. Scowling and attempting to hold back tears, Tangie replies, "She could have killed me," and the two scream, push, and slap each other until Tangie falls and Alice turns away. Tangie's pain over her own traumatic abortion and lack of comfort from her mother is revealed. Here, Tangie is vulnerable and in need of care, but also appears promiscuous. Her sexual deviancy is punished as she is refused solace from her mother.

As Perry's creation, Tangie is his debased conception of mixed identity: the product (or "the devil," as Alice called her) of the rape of a black woman by a white man whose life is thus intertwined with violence, sex, and isolation. While the racial mixture of tragic archetypal characters is often implied, Tangie's backstory is vulgar and explicit. Her existence is made more harrowing by the fact that she was born because her grandfather gave Alice to a white man because he "didn't want granddaughters as 'ugly' as Alice."[121] As a representation of mixed race, Tangie carries the heavy weight of being unloved and trapped between anger and resentment.

Alice and Tangie symbolize two different kinds of abuse that black women are subject to because of their race, skin color, and physical bodies. Alice deviates from white beauty ideals; Tangie's light skin, slender frame, and straight hair conform to Western standards of beauty. Alice represents black women who have been routinely denied humanity and femininity, resulting in their lack of protection from bodily and psychological harm; Tangie, on the other hand, is similar to mulattas that Dagbovie defines as "alluring" and signifying "a social taboo."[122] She is "'black' and 'not black,' which unsettles and entices"[123]

---

[121] Jill Dolan, "For Colored Girls." *The Feminist Spectator*, November 7, 2010, accessed May 3, 2011.

[122] Dagbovie, 224.

[123] Ibid.

As Perry's creations, mother and daughter undergo trauma that injures them individually and collectively and disrupts the image of black female sisterhood that the narrative attempts to portray. Here, Newton again plays a tragic figure, but in a twenty-first-century film that markets itself as championing black women. In Newton's character Tangie, Perry reveals lingering discomfort with mixed race and marginalizes characters believed to be illicit by virtue of their race and existence.

Representing Black Identity Without Discussing Race

The biographical drama *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), based on the book by the same name, is a real-life American Dream story in which African Americans play leading roles. Here, Newton plays a woman, Linda Gardner, wife of Chris Gardner (Will Smith), who is at her lowest point.[124] Linda's bitterness and temper define her, making her similar to Christine and Tangie. While significant to the plot and the main character's outcome, Newton only appears in a third of the film.

The Pursuit of Happyness is based on the real-life story of African American man Chris Gardner, determined to rise above his paycheck-to-paycheck existence, support his son, and achieve a lucrative career and financial success. Deemed an American Dream story due to its formulaic plot of hard work, determination, risk, and a little bit of luck, *The Pursuit* takes place during the financialization of the stock market and economic downturn of the 1980s, when homelessness was on the rise and those unemployed or even underemployed struggled to maintain a stable residence. While Chris is employed selling medical scanners to doctors, this job does not bring in a set or stable income, and he cannot support his family without Linda's

[124] *The Pursuit of Happyness*, directed by Gabriele Muccino (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

income contribution. When Chris decides to take an extremely competitive, unpaid internship in a stockbroker-training program where only 1 in 20 will be hired, Linda is enraged. Already in debt and struggling to make rent, Chris has chosen to set his sights unbelievably high, hoping for a significant rise in class status if he can make the cut.

Chris represents one black man's struggle to rise above his circumstances, yet his race is not presented as a socioeconomic barrier or reason why he and his wife lack education, money, and connections to get better paying jobs. Scott Tobias notes how the film glosses over racial issues in spite of featuring an African American man attempting to enter a historically white profession, remarking, "The film fails to address the obvious racial divide between Smith, his coworkers at the film, and the queasily paternalistic white bosses who determine his fate."[125] In an interview, the real-life Gardner also denies that racism contributed to his dire financial status, instead blaming his lack of college education and a well-connected family: "The biggest 'ism' I've ever had to deal with in getting into this business was placeism, not racism."[126] While Hollywood took creative license with Gardner's story,[127] neither he nor the film critiques the limits of the American Dream for African Americans; thus, wealth in the film appears to derive from hard work and toughing out even the most devastating situations.[128] Without commenting on racial inequality, the film presents African Americans as running up against fairly rigid

[125] Scott Tobias, "The Pursuit of Happyness," *A.V. Club*, December 14, 2006, accessed October 9, 2016.

[126] Belinda Elliott, "Chris Gardner: A Determined Father," *CBN*, n.d., accessed October 9, 2016. See also Marianne Costantinou, "Chris Gardner Has Pursued Happiness, from the Glide Soup Kitchen to the Big Screen," *SFGate*, October 10, 2005, accessed May 13, 2015. Gardner told Costantinou he "doesn't blame race for how hard it was to get a foot in. He says it was 'place-ism' –or really, class. He didn't have a college degree or parents who were professionals . . . or have a network of well-to-do-friends."

[127] Ibid. Gardner expected this and gave permission.

[128] Hung Vo, "Is The Pursuit of Happyness Inaccurate?" *The Huffington Post*, June 26, 2012, accessed October, 9 2016.

class—rather than race—limitations, and so Chris and Linda are primarily defined by their lower-class status from which they desperately want to break free.

Linda is a deeply resentful wife and mother who works double shifts in a labor-intensive laundry; director Gabriele Muccino created Linda from a combination of the real Chris Gardner's ex-wife and the girlfriend that is Christopher's mother. Linda's racial identity is unmentioned, and she is presumably coded as African American by her low socioeconomic status and lack of opportunities, which mirror Chris's and are relatively common for African Americans in the United States. She also has an African American son, Christopher (Jayden Smith).[129] While race is not discussed as the cause of Linda's struggle, her character resembles Newton's roles in *Crash* and *For Colored Girls* in that all three characters are partially defined by their anger, and Tangie and Linda resent their life situations. Thus, as Linda, Newton plays yet another role where her character lacks a full range of emotions and the ability to redeem herself. Instead, Linda is primarily shown as frustrated and exhausted from working long hours to keep the family afloat. She lacks the resources to make changes.[130]

Linda's financial support and help with Christopher are crucial to Chris maintaining a semblance of stability while chasing his dreams; therefore, when Linda refuses to further sacrifice for Chris, she is depicted as cynical and unfeeling. Similar to Newton's other roles where she degrades her male partners or lovers, Linda demeans Chris's dreams. Her cynicism over rising above their class status is contrasted with Chris's idealism. Her only power in a society that oppresses her is to take out her anger on those with whom she is intimate. While her

[129] Nothing contradicts that Linda is African American. As in most Hollywood films, Newton speaks with an American accent.

[130] See Diane Shipley, "Daddy Issues: The Pursuit of Happyness and the Trouble with the American Dream," *Bitch Media*, December 3, 2012, accessed May 13, 2015, https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/daddy-issues-the-pursuit-of-happyness-and-the-trouble-with-the-american-dream. Gardner is competing almost exclusively with whites for prospective jobs and internships. The film blames Gardner's hardships on the economic recession of the 1980s in an attempt to gloss over the structural inequalities that plague job opportunities for African Americans.

bitterness toward Chris makes her an unsympathetic character, scenes of Linda working in a sweltering laundry facility reaffirm the hardships of those who are burdened by their socioeconomic status. Chris's audacity to work for a better future rather than taking on menial work to catch up on overdue bills causes Linda to use their son against him in her threats to leave. When Linda finally leaves the family, the break is irreparable; her actions are never forgiven.

As an overworked mother in the midst of a failing marriage, dangerously close to poverty, and unable to raise her son on her own, Linda is a conflicted, but pitiful character. By leaving her son, Linda is doing the unthinkable for a mother, which Newton attributes to "self-destructive behavior" and "a slow suicide" that Linda will endure once she cuts ties for good.[131] Her internal struggles over not taking Christopher with her play out in her last conversation with Chris: "I'm his mom. I should have him, right."[132] Yet, Linda agrees with Chris that she will not be able to take care of Christopher, and this failure, along with her abrupt exit from the film, leave no opportunity for her to make up for her abandonment or reveal more layers to her personality.

As Linda, Newton plays an African American character, displaying her racial fluidity by taking on a black role despite several previous roles as mixed-race or ambiguous. After being celebrated for her racially ambiguous appearance in *M:I-2,* Newton did not show a trend of playing roles where her character's race was erased or where she was part of a primarily white cast. Instead, she continued to join racially diverse and black ensemble casts. Still, in *The Pursuit of Happyness,* while African Americans have the lead roles as African American characters, crucial racial discussions are purposefully omitted. Here, detaching race from the characters'

[131] Ibid.

[132] *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

struggles and replacing it with class as the limiting cultural factor mirrors post-racial attempts at minimizing the significance of race in the lives of non-whites. Finally, as a black rather than a fraught mixed-race character, Linda is still constructed in ways that show similarities to some of Newton's previous mixed-race characters. Like Christine and Tangie, she lacks full complexity, and her emotions are primarily anger and rage. Plus, similar to Christine, Linda's husband is redeemed, but she is not.

Limits on Mixed-Race Performers Acting Across Cultures and Ethnicities

The films analyzed above illustrate Newton's racial, cultural, and language fluidity; her ability to transcend racial categories; and her repeated casting patterns that put mixed-race black characters in the spotlight, only to have directors revive antiquated stereotypes. Since Newton's physical appearance can code her characters as mixed or solely black, she was able to easily play Thandiwe, Christine, and Tangie, whose mixed-race identity is central to their lives, or Linda, whose African American identity is presumed.

In *W* (2008) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), Newton showed racial fluidity by playing single-race black characters; these roles differed from the characters mentioned previously as they did not emphasize recycled tropes of mixed-race, nor were they detached from a racial identity. Playing an African American, Condoleeza Rice (*W*) and an African, Olanna (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), Newton could not be accused of denying her racial background by developing racially ambiguous characters, yet she was criticized for taking roles that could have gone to a single-race African American actress in the former, or a Nigerian specific actress in the latter. In these roles, Newton showed versatility and made progress as a mixed-race actress, yet her casting revealed challenges for mixed performers playing black characters. Having part black

ancestry was not enough to escape criticism for engaging in blackface while playing Rice, or for denying a role to a specific African ethnic match as Olanna. In both roles, Newton was condemned for affirming skin color hierarchy that exists in both Hollywood and Nigeria where the films were financed and directed. Thus, Newton's casting continually reveals mixed-race performers' limits on cross-racial performance, racial fluidity, and even playing their own race. She is criticized for playing characters detached from race, characters that perpetuate stereotypes of mixed race, characters that of single-race black ancestry, and characters where she is a racially but not ethnically specific match.

While previously known for playing characters deemed beautiful and highly sexual, Newton has also been able to significantly alter her appearance to be coded as an African American woman who looks nothing like her. In 2008, Newton took on what she deems was her most challenging role, playing former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the biographical film *W*, directed by Oliver Stone.[133] Stone wanted a "feelalike not a lookalike."[134] To mirror Rice's appearance exactly, Newton would have needed to use prosthetics. Instead, skin-darkening make-up was used. However, due to the history of blackface performance and marginalization of black and dark-skinned actors on screen, darkening one's skin to play a role remains controversial. Blackface is also often used as a form of caricature. Consequently, its use could be considered degrading to Rice.

Not sure she could undertake the challenge, Newton extensively researched Rice's background and political life, mannerisms, body movements, and speech. Newton said that

---

[133] Many did not know at the time that Newton and Rice are both racially mixed. On *Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Samuel L. Jackson, Condoleezza Rice and Ruth Simmons* on April 29, 2012, DNA analysis revealed Rice's ancestry is "51% African, 40% European, and 9% Native American or Asian." Playing Rice, Newton was playing a racially mixed woman.

[134] Sian Lewis, "Thandie Newton: 'Condi Was My Hardest Role Ever'," *Independent*, October 31, 2008, accessed March 26, 2014.

playing Rice was "my hardest role ever ."[135] Since Rice is a well-known political figure, Newton had to be convincing as a powerful middle-aged woman, speak with an American accent, and use gestures that matched Rice's.[136] As mentioned, Newton also used makeup, plus a wig, false teeth, and darker contact lenses, and padding was added to her costumes. Taken together, all of these additions significantly altered her appearance, recreating her as similar to the elder, larger African American woman. Some critics saw the costuming used to play Rice as successful; Leslie O'Toole wrote, "The physical transformation is uncanny."[137]

Due to physical as well as a twenty-year age difference between Rice and Newton, along with the way Newton is understood as mixed race while Rice is viewed as singularly African American, Newton's casting shocked film critics; however, it actually wasn't all that surprising, given the trend, at the time, of casting popular mixed and lighter-skinned actresses to play black characters. The initial concern over Newton's portrayal of Rice was not unfounded. In costume as Rice, Newton became unrecognizable, thus negating the idea that casting her, a star performer, would bring in audiences and revenue due to her popularity. Despite extensive study and impersonating of Rice, many critics seemed unable to see physical similarities between the two women because of the power we attribute to skin color and race to mark the body. Thus, for many, Newton could not be visually similar enough to Rice for her performance to be complimentary rather than problematic. Furthermore, few black actresses—and especially middle-aged ones—are featured in large budget films, and so casting Newton meant denying a potential middle-aged black actress the role in order to give it to someone who had to become indistinguishable to play Rice. While it is common to modify hairstyle, clothing, and accent to

[135] Ibid.

[136] Rice is almost two decades older than Newton. Newton regularly plays characters close to her own age.

[137] Lesley O'Toole, "The First Lady," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2008, accessed November 25, 2015.

take on a character, using false teeth, darker makeup and padded clothing are more extreme ways of costuming and reaffirmed that by using Newton, the director had star power but not the best character fit.[138]

Film reviewers who mentioned Newton often deemed her wrong for the part and hinted at the inappropriateness of her costuming and mimicked bodily movements, showing discomfort with what could amount to blackface performance and caricaturing of Rice.[139] While the size modifications and style of clothing mirrored the real-life Rice, film critics viewed Newton as wrong for the role due to the amount of costuming needed, and because it appears as an inappropriate cross-racial performance.

What's more, Rice's character is arguably irrelevant to the film despite being a major part of the Bush administration. When she is on screen, her role mirrors those of actors of color who are relegated to bit parts, while whites fill the lead roles. She has primarily single lines or is shown in the background. Ultimately, she lacks character development. Rice is merely an onlooker, talked over, or ignored. She is made even more insignificant when the President speaks to the cabinet and refers to them as "gentlemen" despite Rice's presence.

If Rice was loved by the American public, there may have been further critical and audience backlash over Newton's casting.[140] The role ended up being relatively insignificant since many of Rice's scenes were cut. Audiences and film critics were upset over Newton's casting because of her lighter skin and mixed background that seemed to reaffirm colorism and

---

[138] Lewis. Rice's character was almost unanimously deemed a failure . . . if reviews mentioned her at all. Many of Newton's scenes were cut, leaving little for critics to comment on. Newton was disappointed. "I'd gone to such lengths to create this person, like crafting a sculpture, that I kind of expected to see her there on the screen."

[139] See Tom Hoopes, "Oliver Stone's '*W.*' Backfires," *CBS News*, October 24, 2008, accessed November 25, 2015. "Her performance here insults more than imitates." See also Bob Mondello, "'W.': Taking Aim at a Lame Duck," *NPR*, October 17, 2008, accessed November 25, 2015. "Condoleezza Rice is a cartoon."

[140] In the Conclusion, I analyze the controversy over Zoe Saldana playing Nina Simone in *Nina*.

the continued marginalization of single-race black actresses in Hollywood. Having part black ancestry was also not enough to escape criticism for engaging in blackface. As Rice, Newton's casting emphasized the difficulty mixed-race performers have when they play black characters; despite embracing their black ancestry and ability to cross-racially perform, they are not always understood by critics and audiences as black.

Following *W*, Newton was cast in another role that revealed the controversy over mixed-race black performers using their fluidity to play any black character: despite her racial and cultural diversity and her African roots, Newton's inappropriateness to play the part of a Nigerian character was questioned by African audiences.[141] Newton was cast as Olanna, a lead Nigerian character, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, based on the book by Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. While filming in Nigeria, Newton's mixed background, physical appearance, and foreigner status led to mixed responses about her casting, in that audiences saw problems with a Western, mixed-race actress playing an African character, especially one of specific and singular ethnicity and nationality.

Though criticized, Newton felt she could represent a Nigerian character due to the diversity of skin colors within the country. Newton stated, "In Nigeria there were arguments about whether I look like an Igbo woman. Chimamanda, who is Igbo herself, showed me a picture of her family. There was every skin tone, ranging from her brother, whose skin is lighter than mine, to a rich, dark, coffee-coloured brown."[142] Despite viewing herself as a visual fit and adapting well within Nigerian society and culture, Newton's casting still appeared to many to be a wrong fit. Her skin color, even if similar to some in Nigeria, represented privilege and

[141] Controversy over Newton's role in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is discussed further in the conclusion.

[142] Bromwich.

subliminally encouraged the trend of skin lightning by toxic methods.[143] Ultimately, her casting in general took a role away from a Nigerian performer—one who might not reinforce the colorism that is pervasive in many African countries, and especially Nigeria.[144]

During filming, Newton's English nationality, mixed background, and light skin did not marginalize her among the Nigerian cast and crew. However, Nigerian film critics and some African American audiences deemed her an inappropriate fit for her character. Despite the film's cast and characters demonstrating diversity in African ethnicity, appearance, and skin color, Newton was still an outsider who lacked Nigerian and full African ancestry and Nigerian language skills; therefore, her casting was viewed as privileging a light-skinned, international star over a Nigerian performer.[145] This was a particularly sensitive issue because the film was especially meaningful to Nigerians and hailed as "one of the most eagerly awaited films to come out of Africa in recent years."[146] Oris Aigbokhaevbolo deemed the casting of Newton—and other African American and black British performers in lead roles—in a film deemed "a milestone in Nigerian film" to be "blaxproximation—the idea that all black people are the same."[147] He critiqued the actors as primarily "a bunch of citizens of the western hemisphere emoting Africa."[148] According to Aigbokhaevbolo, these actors and actresses mangled the Nigerian language and took parts that could have gone to prominent Nigerian performers.

[143] See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, 286.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Oris Aigbokhaevbolo, "Half of a Yellow Sun Not for Nigerians," *This is Africa*, November 30, 2014, accessed February 13, 2017.

[146] Soffel.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

Igbo fan Ashley Akunna went one step further and started a Change.org petition, "Reconsider Casting of Half of a Yellow Sun,"[149] to cast a more accurate representation of an Igbo woman. Akunna acknowledged that skin color diversity exists among Igbo people, yet stated that Newton is much lighter than most.[150] Akunna argued that with the "skin bleaching epidemic" that plagues Nigeria, having Newton represent an Igbo woman reinforces the idea that "light skin and curly hair is the only way black woman can be represented in the media, because that is the only way they are attractive."[151] The petition was unsuccessful and did not lead to Newton being recast. However, other critics such as East African analyst Samira Sawlani commented that Newton playing an Igbo woman supports skin tone hierarchy and also prevented prominent Nigerian—and darker-skinned—actress Genevieve Nnaji from having a lead role.[152] Thus, Newton's casting supports the idea that black ethnicity can be represented by lighter skin and mixed race, and when dark-skinned actresses are passed over to play these black characters, light skin privilege is reinforced**.** Finally, the negative feedback over Newton's casting revealed that despite attempting to continuously play characters that emphasize black ancestry; mixed-race actresses can be viewed as wrong for roles where their black identity differs from the specific kind of black ancestry that is expected and desired by fans and critics.

Contrasting Constructions of Mixed-Race Identity

As a mixed-race performer at the turn of the twenty-first century, Newton stood for racial progress and the varying possibilities for those with racial fluidity. However, a significant

[149] Ashley Akunna, "Reconsider Casting Half of a Yellow Sun," *Change.org*, 2011, accessed March 26, 2014.

[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Sawlani.

number of her characters are almost entirely defined and burdened by their mixed ancestry. Many of these roles were constructed according to deeply rooted stereotypes of racially mixed women as inherently deviant and excessively sexual. Often, they resembled underdeveloped tragic mulatta figures, caricatures of mixed race, or their lives were inseparable from their illicit sexual behavior or sexual exploitation. Newton's highly sexualized mixed black characters were regularly lusted after or abused by white men, emphasizing female racial, gender, and social inferiority. The desire that Newton's mixed characters elicited was derived from their unique beauty and background, which was culturally similar to whites, but still racially distinct.

Newton has also cast been cast as single-race African or African American characters. In these roles, her mixed ancestry and physical appearance have been reasons why her portrayals were not always deemed successful. Newton succeeds playing an African American character, such as Linda Gardner in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, when she does not have to be heavily costumed and when her casting does not prevent a better-matched solely African or African American performer from obtaining a role. Alternatively, Newton was deemed an inappropriate fit for the well-known African and Nigerian character Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the real-life Condoleezza Rice in *W*; in these roles her background, physical appearance, and speech deviated too far from critics and audiences expectations and, in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Newton and was said to have taken a role that could have gone to one of many Nigerian actresses. However, when playing characters defined by their mixed ancestry, Newton receives recognition for a successful performance (i.e., Thandiwe in *Flirting* or Christine Thayer in *Crash*). Moreover, even if her character is deemed problematic and receives negative press, if it is one of a mixed identity, such as Thandie in *For Colored Girls*, Newton is still considered a racially appropriate fit.

Newton's appearance and skin color have factored into how she is received by audiences. Mixed performers are not always viewed as the right fit to play African or African American characters because, despite their own African ancestry, they do not always match the visual expectations of what is considered African/black. Finally, when lighter-skinned performers are given more access to roles, or are used instead of darker-skinned performers, they reaffirm color and racial hierarchies despite their own part-black ancestry.

Much of Newton's success has come from playing conflicted racially mixed characters that mirror her personal struggles and reiterate mixed race as fraught. Newton herself embodies a mixed black identity that encompasses multiple and/or mixed ethnicities, races, cultures, and nationalities, including ties to Zimbabwe, Africa, Britain, and the United States; therefore, through Newton, mixed race can be understood as complex, inclusive, and multidimensional. However, her characters' narrow constructions portray mixed race as an identity that is limiting, and reveal Hollywood directors' tendency to fall back on recycled stereotypes rather than depict new and complex versions of mixed-race characters. As a result, Newton's on-screen depictions of mixed race contrast sharply with her own identity and with the media's positive construction of mixed race at the time when the majority of her films were released.

CHAPTER THREE

Maya Rudolph: An Exceptional Embodiment of Any and All Races

Maya Rudolph is African American and Jewish. She is an actress, writer, and musician, and is best known as a groundbreaking comedian. Her mother was the African American musician and R&B singer Minnie Riperton; she died when Rudolph was six years old. Rudolph's father, Richard Rudolph, is of Ashkenazi Jewish descent and was a songwriter and back-up musician for the late Riperton. Rudolph's understanding of her Jewish identity came from being raised by her father, whereas due to her mother's early passing, Rudolph felt that her African American ties were fragmented.[1] In an interview with *The Guardian*'s Tom Lamont, she remarked, "I grew up without a lot of identity, and specifically black female identity . . . some of it I just sort of made up."[2]

According to Rudolph, race has had minimal significance in her life; this mirrors the way she is constructed as an early twenty-first-century post-racial performer. Rudolph describes growing up in a race-neutral environment: "People expect race to be an issue and I was raised in a house where it was never as issue. My parents were interested in having us feel like we were normal whatever that is."[3]

Rudolph exemplifies racial fluidity. She transcends racial boundaries by being known apart from her racial background. Many of her roles are not clearly racially defined, and she does not take divisive political stances on race. Moreover, she uses comedy to poke fun at race mixing and multiculturalism. All of this contributes to Rudolph's appeal across audiences.

---

[1] Tom Lamont, "Maya Rudolph: I'm Not a Woman in Comedy. I'm a Comedian," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2015, accessed December 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/dec/05/maya-rudolph-im-not-a-woman-in-comedy-im-a-comedian-saturday-nigh-live-bridesmaids-sisters.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Silverstein.

Rudolph is one of the most versatile racially mixed performers on screen today, and one of the very few to play more than one race at a time. She has made great strides for black women in comedy, yet she does not create characters with race in mind, nor does she attribute significance to the race of the characters written for her. Consequently, she regularly plays characters completely detached from race. Despite success as a black and mixed performer who embodies black and mixed roles, Rudolph often rejects racial designations; she would rather be known for her comedic talent alone.

Due to her *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) run and background as an impersonator and comedian, Rudolph has crossed more racial boundaries than most other part-black mixed-race performers. The lack of black female comedians on the show meant that Rudolph's ability to fit in with the show's white creators advanced her career in ways that are rare for black performers. As a comedian known for impressions, Rudolph is continually brought into the public light when headline news features someone that she could play and likely would if she were still on *SNL*.

Rudolph is considered a black comedian while also being known as an actress who is—and can be cast as—raceless. Tanner Colby argues that Rudolph's seamless integration into *SNL* was the result of her comfort and familiarity with white society and culture, and her ability to assimilate.[4] Critiquing *SNL*'s preferences for specific types of black comedians, Colby writes, "There's a general trend . . . the black performers who found a home at *SNL* knew how to navigate the terrain of white America long before they mailed in their audition tapes."[5] Further, despite Rudolph's talent, Colby argues that "her success on the show probably had as much to do with her ability to form relationships as it did her ability to land a joke."[6]

---

[4] Tanner Colby, "*SNL*'s Real Race Problem," *Slate*, January 9, 2014, accessed January 6, 2017.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

On *SNL*, and in her subsequent film and television career, Rudolph's race was alternately highlighted, manipulated, neutralized, and ignored. It was deemed a significant part of her rise to fame, despite her arguments to the contrary. Her refusal to credit her blackness and her mixed racial heritage with shaping her career echoes trends in the industry to neutralize or erase race through new preferences for ambiguous casting. By resisting racial classifications and identifying as race neutral, Rudolph affirms post-race beliefs that race does not have to be a defining characteristic.

Part of the reason Rudolph appeals to various audiences is due to the way her black and mixed race are presented. Colby argues that Rudolph's race brings diversity to productions, yet it is an assimilated diversity. "People like Rudolph and Zamata. More Bill Cosbys. More Will Smiths. Faces and voices that are black but nonetheless reflect a cultural bearing that white people understand and feel comfortable with."[7] These performers are popular with general/non-racially specific audiences. Smith in particular can be cast in roles that are racially specific or roles that do not deal with race at all; he is known as African American, yet his success is atypical for a non-white actor. However, by presenting an ambiguous identity which creates distance from black culture, Rudolph denies African Americans the opportunity to affiliate with one of the few black performers who has achieved unprecedented successes in a racist industry. Black performers who are defined by their race and too ingrained in black culture to be known to all audiences usually cannot find success across races as Rudolph does,[8] and in fact, she is one of the few African Americans in Hollywood to detach from race without sparking backlash. However, on screen, when Rudolph is detached from black identity, her characters are not

[7] Colby.

[8] Ibid.

representative of African Americans, and so crediting her success as "black" success seems to validate a specific type of black identity that is also racially and culturally white.

Productions featuring Rudolph benefit from her notoriety and the diversity she can bring, because of the many ways her race can be coded. Interestingly, Rudolph's cross-racial performances have not resulted in her characters contradicting themselves. She is visibly convincing as various races, and audiences have come to know her as a performer capable of embodying multiple racial and cultural identities.[9]

Few performers of Rudolph's celebrity are accepted as multiple races all at once.[10] Being perceived as black or non-white can bar some performers from later being cast as neutral or white.[11] Rudolph, however, is regularly coded white, mixed-race, or part black in film; she is simultaneously deemed black when categorized as a comedian or writer due to her ground-breaking work in comedy and the field's racially exclusive nature. Moreover, in film, Rudolph has also played characters who appeared racially ambiguous or race neutral because they were detached from black ancestry.[12] Yet, unlike many other performers who play neutral or raceless roles, who have been accused of not wanting to align with their black ancestry, Rudolph is

[9] On *SNL* Rudolph played characters of different ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds in a single episode.

[10] In 2010–2011, Rudolph was coded black in *Grown-Ups* (2010), coded mixed-race in *Bridesmaids* (2011), detached from a racial identity in *Friends with Kids* (2011), and coded as mixed-race or black in *Up All Night* (2011–2012).

[11] See Beltrán, "Mixed Race in Latinowood," 259–260. There is "pivotal importance" to the way "a performer's appearance and early career choices are 'read' by critics . . . and ultimately contribute to the construction of racialized star images. This is particularly noticeable in the case of mixed race actors. . . . Mixed race is increasingly an identity category available to stars, but one that is unstable when it comes to its impact on their careers."

[12] In *Idiocracy* (2006) and *Away We Go* (2009), Rudolph played a lead female and part-black. In *Bridesmaids* and *Up All Night*, Rudolph was the second lead female and mixed-race, but lived in a white world. In *Friends with Kids*, Rudolph had a featured role and was coded as race-neutral. Rudolph also had small, but widely publicized, parts in *Inherent Vice* (2013) and *The Way Way Back* (2013); her characters were race-neutral, no racial identity was stated. In *Grown Ups* & *Grown Ups 2*, Rudolph had a minor role, but her character was coded as black.

celebrated for being a black and mixed actress despite playing characters with little or no black ancestry.[13]

Due to continuously playing black characters and celebrities throughout her career, Rudolph is identified as many different races. She is viewed as not being attached to a specific race *and* as black simultaneously, due to her unique racial fluidity and audience desire for more impressions. For instance, when the Rachel Dolezal story first made major news headlines (June 2015), *SNL* fans began asking Rudolph for an impersonation.[14] Within two weeks, Rudolph complied during an appearance on *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. Of Rudolph's persistent fame across audiences, Lauren Larson writes, "Even though she left SNL in 2007, Maya Rudolph is apparently still the nation's first choice to play Rachel Dolezal (actually she's still the nation's first choice to play pretty much anyone.)"[15] Rudolph's version of Dolezal was a success and has over 4,481,000 views on *Youtube.*

In Hollywood films, especially when romantically paired, Rudolph's characters often lack complexity and a fully articulated background. Without racial, ethnic, or cultural identifications or traits, Rudolph's characters do not disrupt all-white casts, but they lack depth. Since Rudolph's characters rarely express racial affiliations, relationships with whites are not always perceived as interracial, and they are often underdeveloped.[16] Family members that could

[13] Mixed actresses who identify with their African ancestry often seek out significant black roles. Thandie Newton, Jennifer Beals, and Halle Berry have played black characters whose black identity was essential to their role and storyline. As a performer who readily speaks about her mixed background and famous African American mother, Rudolph's playing neutral characters and lack of significant black characters sets her apart.

[14] Samantha Grossman, "Watch Maya Rudolph's Hilarious Rachel Dolezal Impression," *Time,* June 23, 2015, accessed June 29, 2017, http://time.com/3931829/rachel-dolezal-maya-rudolph-impression/.

[15] Lauren Larson, "Watch Maya Rudolph's Spot-On Rachel Dolezal Impression," *GQ,* June 23, 2015, accessed June 29, 2017, http://www.gq.com/story/watch-maya-rudolphs-spot-on-rachel-dolezal-impression.

[16] This is despite the race of Rudolph's characters, which can be coded as black, mixed, or detached from any racial background.

be used to provide clues about a character's race often do not exist. If relatives do appear, they are often in minor roles, even in films centered on family events such as weddings.

Rudolph has received numerous commendations from the NAACP Image Awards and Black Reel Awards despite the fact that her characters do not always express a black identity.[17] Rudolph's award nominations often relate to her opening doors for racial minorities and are not necessarily based on the characters she portrays. For instance, she was the first woman of color to star in a Judd Apatow film, *Bridesmaids*. With writer and co-star Kristen Wiig and the supporting female cast, Rudolph demonstrated that women-led comedies could generate high box office revenue: the film grossed $288,383,523 worldwide.[18] Due to the success of *Bridesmaids*, the term "Bridesmaids Effect" was coined, pointing to the film as validating women's comedic talents and eventually leading to studios being more receptive to backing "female-driven comedies."[19] With *Bridesmaids*, Rudolph made major strides for two of Hollywood's most marginalized groups, women in comedies and women of color.

Recently, while being in various stages of motherhood, Rudolph played ambiguous characters that were part of primarily white casts. Dave Itzkoff describes these projects as centering on maternity, pregnancy, and new motherhood. "Without quite intending to, she has built a body of work in which motherhood and a self-defined sense of femininity have been intertwined themes."[20] Since Rudolph had four children in eight years, she was regularly pregnant or recently post-pregnancy on screen. Rarely sexualized in the media or featured in

---

[17] Rudolph was nominated for Black Reel Awards for *Away We Go* (2011) and *Bridesmaids* (2012) and NAACP Image Awards for *Bridesmaids* (2012), *Saturday Night Live* (2007), and *Up All Night*, (2012).

[18] "Bridesmaids," *Box Office Mojo*, January 5, 2016.

[19] Emma Mustich, "Wiig Rides 'Bridesmaids' Success into New Role," *Salon*, July 13, 2011, accessed May 15, 2015.

[20] Dave Itzkoff, "Juggling a Comedy Series about Juggling Life's Tasks," *The New York Times*, September 9, 2011, accessed June 22, 2015, https://mobile.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/arts/television/maya-rudolph-appears-in-the-series-up-all-night.html.

roles where her character was highly sensual, Rudolph, unlike most female actresses, was not criticized for her weight changes or for looking pregnant when her character was childless. Thus, her previous portrayals of diverse characters and body sizes may have afforded her greater leeway with her appearance, even in an industry that is immensely critical of women's bodies. The public nature of Rudolph's pregnancies and the roles in which her characters were pregnant and in the early stages of motherhood meant her figure changes were routine. Furthermore, because she is celebrated as a comedian rather than an actress known for being sensual, Rudolph was able to poke fun about her ever-growing size and was spared the media's rampant fat shaming.[21]

In spite of her racial background, Rudolph has also escaped the eroticizing that follows many mixed female actresses.[22] Though she has been heralded as a "biracial beauty"[23] and appeared in photo spreads where she is scantily clad and heavily made-up, the majority of press focuses on her talent.[24] Since she had few roles playing highly sexual characters, she is not presented as a fetishized female performer.

Rudolph's transition from *SNL* to the silver screen took place amid the Obama and post-race eras. At this time, her ability to play all races, her appeal across audiences, and the lack of black comedians with her level of versatility contributed to Rudolph's unprecedented success. Despite being known as a black comedian, Rudolph's part-white ancestry shaped her career trajectory. Unlike most black performers, Rudolph's racial fluidity meant she could take on roles where race was not a defining part of her character's life or a central theme of the film. Even

[21] Jeffrey Ufberg, "Maya Rudolph Jokes about 70 Pound Weight Gain," *People*, May 15, 2009, accessed June 24, 2015. In 2009, pregnant with her second child, Rudolph's poking fun at herself about her 70lb weight gain during her first pregnancy on *The Late Show with David Letterman* was viewed as "brave."

[22] Especially Halle Berry, Thandie Newton, and Mariah Carey, as mentioned in earlier chapters.

[23] Coddett.

[24] Ibid.

when she played mixed and part-black characters, their race was not emphasized, and so these non-white characters depicted the lessening significance of racial identity in the twenty-first century. Rudolph now receives top billing in large-budget Hollywood films playing any race or raceless. Even though Rudolph's characters rarely represent black identity or culture, fans, audiences, and film critics continue to refer to her career as breaking barriers for black performers in Hollywood.

Racial Performances Across Comedy Genres

Rudolph's performances are primarily comedic and span several forms of the genre. As entertainment, a popular type of Hollywood film, and an art form, comedy occurs when familiar events are made bizarre to produce the outcome of a bodily response such as laughter.[25] Jokes and humor are used to provide entertainment in a way that "mocks convention and offers a (temporary) liberation from routine restrictions."[26] Jokes are also used to comment on culture and society. Comedy subverts the norm by making the everyday laughable, and provides an outlet for vocalizing uncomfortable subjects. Garber writes,

> The point of comedy has always been on some level, a kind of productive subversion. Observational comedy, situational comedy, slapstick comedy that both enlightens and offends – these are forms of creative destruction . . . they've long allowed us to talk about things that taboos, or at the very lease taste, might otherwise preclude.[27]

---

[25] Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging* (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2004), 127.

[26] Maira Romanska and Alan Ackerman, eds., *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 1.

[27] Megan Garber, "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals," *The Atlantic*, May 28, 2015, accessed January 4, 2017.

Due to the communal nature of stand-up and sketch comedy, and the way these performances are reproduced and shared via digital formats, comedians have been recast as well-known "public intellectuals" who reach millions.[28] They can help bring awareness to and educate on controversial subjects that are not expected or assumed to be funny. For instance, stand-up and sketch comedians often perform cultural criticism, commenting on issues such as racism, sexism, and politics, and often challenging the dominant narrative.[29]

Maya Rudolph is best known for her work in sketch comedy impersonating celebrities and acting out situations that resonate with audiences while being absurd. Rudolph states that the comedy that wins over audiences is "as close to reality as possible" while being "completely ridiculous."[30] As a performer on *SNL*, Rudolph took part in a decades-long show that regularly parodied as well as criticized current media and political events. Sketches on *SNL* are performed in front of a live audience and recorded for television. Emily Nussbaum describes a classical sketch comedy skit as "an absurd situation . . . cranked up and up and up, until it explodes."[31] Rudolph's sketch comedy fits the traditional format of sketches where one or more characters performs in a brief scene "within which the comic possibilities of a premise . . . a situation, a relationship, a conversation and its topics, a mode of language, speech, or behavior, or some

[28] Ibid. For instance, on *Youtube.com*, some of Rudolph's most famous impersonations have over four million views. "Maya Rudolph's Impressions" from *The Ellen Show* has 4,142,919 views, and "Maya Rudolph's Rachel Dolezal Impression" from *Late Night with Seth Meyers* has 4,243,839 views.

[29] Garber includes, "Amy Schumer on misogyny, Key and Peele on terrorism, Louis C.K. on parenting, Sarah Silverman on Rand Paul, John Oliver on FIFA."

[30] Alexandra Wolfe, "The Real Maya Rudolph," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 3, 2016, accessed January 6, 2017.

[31] Emily Nussbaum, "Color Commentary: The Shape-Shifting Masterminds of 'Key & Peele'," *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, accessed January 6, 2017.

other organizing principle – are either pursued to the point of climax and conclusion . . . or else simply abandoned."[32]

For Rudolph and other mixed-race comedians such as Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele (Key & Peele), sketch comedy performances often include a racial component; their mixed backgrounds help them perform and find relevancy across audiences without backlash for taking on multiple racial identities. Within sketch comedy, racial politics come into play in terms of power relations, and so for non-white and mixed-race comedians, the roles they play are especially significant. Some of their jokes work primarily because they are "punching up" by making jokes that are comical because they are the minority critiquing the dominant majority.[33] Writing on the way that Key and Peele integrate their mixed race into their sketch comedy, Nussbaum writes, "Biracialism is central to their comedy . . . it is expansive, not constricting, a Golden Ticket to themes rarely explored on television . . . they treat human behavior as a form of drag, shape-shifting with aggressive fluidity."[34] Terry Gross from *NPR*'s *Fresh Air*, states that "Perhaps because they're biracial, they're perfectly comfortable satirizing white people and African-Americans — as well as everybody else."[35]

Similar to Key & Peele, Rudolph's mixed and African American backgrounds help her to play characters across races, something that would be less tolerated were she solely white, or less believable if she did not appear as a mixture of races. Since Rudolph's visual appearance is not simply white, she has racial versatility, and so her characters and impressions incorporate race without being deemed offensive. Wesley Morris writes

---

[32] Steve Neale, "The Sketch Show," in *The Television Genre Book,* 3rd ed., ed. Glen Creeber (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 92.

[33] Nussbaum.

[34] Nussbaum.

[35] Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, "For Key And Peele, Biracial Roots Bestow Special Comedic 'Power'," *Fresh Air*, November 20, 2013, accessed January 6, 2017.

> Rudolph was something else. She is light-skinned and lasted, in part, because she could do everything, both comically and racially, and without a lot of obvious hand-wringing about passing . . . [she] transcended the limits of race without forsaking race itself. She refracted all races and could be any of us.[36]

Being African American and also able to use her mixed identity to play any and all races means that Rudolph has a unique place in sketch comedy, especially on *SNL* where black and non-white comedians have been historically underrepresented or absent.

While mixed-race performers can have difficulty being cast in television or film due to being narrowly categorized by race, the range of characters that sketch comedy necessitates can give mixed-race comedians an advantage. In reference to Key and Peele—but also relatable to mixed comedians like Rudolph—Zadie Smith argues that the way the media represents mixed-race performers is often limited; they are not billed as racially fluid, but rather black actors whose performances are popular across audiences.[37] However, the wide array of characters that most sketch comedy incorporates showcases the adaptability of mixed-race identities. Being partially and not singularly black means that mixed performers may have to "adjust blackness" and over-exaggerate what are considered "black" gestures;[38] however, they have more leeway with cross-racial performances than black comedians.

Rudolph's most notable impersonations were of black celebrities who were popular with multiple audiences, in which she mimicked their larger-than-life personas rather than specific racial traits. For instance, while looking nothing like Oprah Winfrey, Rudolph was able to

---

[36] Wesley Morris, "The Problem of the Black Cast Members on 'SNL'," *Grantland*, August 26, 2014, accessed January 6, 2017.

[37] Zadie Smith, "Brother from Another Mother: Key and Peele's Chameleon Comedy," *The New Yorker*, February 23–March 2, 2015, accessed January 6, 2017.

[38] Smith.

successfully play her by embodying her role as a cultural icon, "the undisputed queen of daytime talk," and as someone who has declared, "I transcend race."[39] Instead of darkening her skin or wearing a fat suit, Rudolph adopted Winfrey's voice, speech patterns, and bodily gestures, resulting in a successful impersonation.[40]

Rudolph's ability to surpass the rigid boundaries of racial categories contributed to her success in comedy and films that have similarities to romantic comedies despite not fitting the exact parameters of the genre. According to Tamar Jeffers McDonald, the romantic comedy, or what is better known as Hollywood's rom-com, "is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion."[41] Many of the films in which Rudolph has been cast in lead and featured roles have elements of a romantic comedy, but do not fit the precise definition due to a lack of emphasis on the couple's romantic interactions.[42] For example, in *Bridesmaids*, despite the fact that a wedding is the central theme, Lillian's engagement is not the focus of the film, and there is little emphasis on romance and love. Thus, while Rudolph's films share similarities with romantic comedies, they diverge from typical Hollywood rom-coms in part due to changes in the format.

Another element that sets Rudolph's films apart the romantic comedy genre is Rudolph herself, a mixed-race actress, playing a mixed character in a lead role. Diversity in rom-coms is sparse, because often, the genre's requirements are rigid and narrow. McDonald writes, "the

---

[39] Bill Zehme, "It Came from Chicago," *Spy Magazine*, December 1986, 30–32.

[40] See "Maya Rudolph Ready to Channel An Oprah-in-the-Making on 'Up All Night'," *Access Hollywood*, August 1, 2011, accessed January 9, 2017. After impersonating Winfrey on *SNL*, Rudolph stated, "She said she was really happy because I was the first woman to actually play her in many years at 'SNL' and that I was like, thin. . . . She thanked us for not putting her in a fat suit."

[41] Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 9.

[42] Ibid., 9.

romantic comedy is one of the most generic of genres, heavily reliant on stock elements, personae, and even dialogue."[43] Rudolph's racial background goes against the norm of casting white romantic leads and supporting cast, thus positioning her films outside the genre of romantic comedy.

One more facet of the romantic comedy genre that Rudolph's films often flout is the quality of "light-heartedness." McDonald writes that despite being considered "comedy," rom-coms may bring about laughs but do not have to be exceptionally funny.[44] However, in more than a few of Rudolph's scenes across a variety of films, her characters incorporate slapstick humor and create situations that are not merely funny, but hilarious.

Playing Every Race on *Saturday Night Live*

As an African American and mixed-race comedian, Rudolph is a pioneer for women in sketch comedy and on television. Rudolph convincingly plays characters from different or multiple ethnic, racial, and cultural groups, a factor that contributed to her success as one of only six African American female comedians thus far to be regular cast members on *Saturday Night Live*. On *SNL*, the writers racially marked Rudolph's characters. "There was never a conscious idea on my part that I was taking an opportunity to fill a hole," she said, "but I think for the writers there was."[45] Discussing mixed race performers impersonating Barak Obama," Beltrán argues, "there are no clear social norms for what is considered politically correct casting for such

[43] Ibid., 10–11.

[44] Ibid., 10.

[45] Kohen, 252.

"mixed" performers."[46] *SNL* writers capitalized on Rudolph's multifaceted racial background for her eight years on the show. Rudolph explained, "obviously if there was a celebrity of a darker skin tone that needed to be in something, and if she was female, there was no question that she was going to be me."[47] However, in *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, Rudolph states that the characters she conceptualized "were not rooted within a particular racial background."[48] She has also stated that when acting, "I never think of characters I play based on race."[49]

Rudolph's training and talent account for her comedic success, but her appearance, skin color, and even physical attractiveness are given as reasons for why she has surpassed almost all African American women in comedy despite not looking conventionally black or promoting herself as black. When Rudolph won a part on *SNL*, she was the third female African American to join the cast.[50] She worked on the show from 1999 to 2007 and was known for crossing all racial boundaries by playing black, white, Asian, Latina, and mixed race, and also for performing across genders. Chris Witherspoon stated that it was "Rudolph's ability to deliver countless accents and change her looks with the switch of a wig that helped her to perform an exceptionally large variety of characters."[51] Danielle Romeo praised Rudolph's success at

---

[46] Mary Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama' Debate: Facing Off Over Millennial (Mixed-) Racial Impersonation," in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, eds. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 191–209.

[47] Kohen, 252.

[48] Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 252.

[49] Melissa Silverstein, "Interview with Maya Rudolph – Away We Go," *Women and Hollywood*, June 5, 2009, accessed May 10, 2011.

[50] After college and a stint playing keyboards for the indie band, The Rentals, Rudolph decided to make comedy her career; her sole aspiration was to be on *Saturday Night Live*. Prior to *SNL*, she studied improvisational comedy for four years (1995–1999) at Groundlings in Los Angeles.

[51] Chris Witherspoon, "Maya Rudolph Defies Racial Types in 'Bridesmaids'," *theGrio*, May 13, 2011, accessed June 8, 2015.

performing across racial and gender roles, adding that Rudolph was also known for playing "young and old, glamorous and grotesque," and lauded her as "one of the greatest talents *SNL* has ever produced . . . [or] at the very least, one of the most versatile."[52] Kerry Coddett deemed Rudolph "a biracial beauty" whose "ability to pass for white, Latina, and Asian undoubtedly contributed to the actress's longevity on the show."[53] It is estimated that, over the duration of her time on *SNL*, Rudolph played 14 different characters and impersonated 47–50 celebrities.

As demonstrated by the dearth of African American female comedians and characters written for them, humor is often grounded in extraordinarily negative perceptions of black women. Blackness itself is in fact deemed comical. While white comedians explore a wide variety of characters, African Americans are mainly offered roles that center on stereotypes of being black. African American female cast members—and the 10 African American female hosts thus far—have been locked into roles that are humorously aggressive and often the butt of the joke. Rhonesha Byng writes that common typecasts of black women on screen include: "gold diggers, modern jezebels, baby mamas, uneducated sisters, ratchet women, angry black women, mean black girls, unhealthy black women, and black barbies."[54] Black women are degraded when cast as "mammy, jezebel, and big-booty ghetto girl" figures.[55] Writers who have publicly spoken out about *SNL*'s problem with depicting black women argue that their characters are repeatedly constructed as caricatures, not individuals with a full ranges of personality traits.

---

[52] Danielle Romeo, "Maya Rudolph's 10 Best 'SNL' Characters," *Hello Giggles*, February 9, 2012, accessed June 8, 2015.

[53] Kerry Coddett, "The Real Problem with *SNL* and Casting Black Women," *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2013, accessed June 10, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/the-real-problem-with-snl-and-casting-black-women/281280/.

[54] Rhonesha Byng, "The Images of Black Women in Media Still 'Only Scratch the Surface,' Essence Study Finds," *The Huffington Post*, October 15, 2013, accessed June 11, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/15/the-images-of-black-women-in-media_n_4102322.html.

[55] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "SNL' Lacks Diversity in the Cast, and the Writers' Room," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2013, accessed January 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/11/03/snl-lacks-diversity-in-the-cast-and-in-the-writers-room/.

Black female characters have appeared for over 40 years as "loud, obnoxious, or promiscuous."[56] McDonald argues that these caricatures "are our ball-and-chain. We can't shake them."[57] Even with new black female comedians added to the cast, the show continues to narrowly portray black characters.

Rudolph stood out as one of the show's few African American comedians who played characters beyond the aforementioned stereotypes. The freedom Rudolph was given to perform beyond her race and gender was a "special power" reserved for her and the few other mixed-race comedians who were able to use their racial versatility to their advantage and win the support of white networks and audiences.[58] Tressie McMillan Cottom argues that Rudolph was also "as close to white normative ideals of beauty as a black woman can probably be."[59] Further, unlike black cast members on *SNL* who had difficulty advancing due to not being socially connected to white writers and producers, Rudolph was fully integrated into all aspects of the show.[60] Due to the racially exclusive nature of *SNL*, integration meant the ability to participate in white culture. Rudolph's actual ties to whiteness through her white background were therefore significant.

By being the only one of their race and gender, black female comedians on *SNL* have been limited to a narrow range of celebrity impersonations. They are not viewed as able to

---

[56] "The SNL Scandal," *Sparkmovement*, November 15, 2013, accessed 10 January 2017.

[57] Ibid.

[58] See Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, "For Key And Peele." Peele states, "Keegan and my race has really played to our advantage in the improv/sketch world. It's also a bit of a special power. We can do characters that other people would feel uncomfortable doing." See also Colby. Rudolph's longevity and success on *SNL* is partly due to being from "fully integrated, majority – white backgrounds," as well as being mixed race, and "her ability to form relationships with white people" i.e., the white writers, producers, and crew that make up *SNL*.

[59] Tressie McMillan Cottom, "Here, a Hypocrite Lives: I Probably Get it Wrong on Leslie Jones but I Tried," *TressieMC*, May 6, 2014, accessed January 10, 2017, https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/here-a-hypocrite-lives-i-probably-get-it-wrong-on-leslie-jones-but-i-tried/.

[60] Ibid. One of *SNL*'s early black cast members, Garrett Morris, was not integrated into the white peer culture of the show. He recalled, "I was a loner and that actually cost me . . . the social life is just as important as your talent, particularly with writers."

contribute to diverse performances, and they are not brought on the show to impersonate non-black celebrities. Rudolph was able to break this mold. She was known for her Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, and Beyoncé impersonations, but beyond creating her versions of these famous African American women, Rudolph also believably imitated stars such as Jennifer Lopez, Lucy Liu, Barbara Streisand, Donatella Versace, Liza Minnelli, and Paris Hilton—all due, at least in part, to her ambiguous appearance. As Dr. Kelli Carter Jackson, in her critical response to *SNL*'s lack of black female comedians, stated, Rudolph "has probably been the most successful black woman on the show but part of that is because she is somewhat racially ambiguous."[61]

In sketch comedy, Rudolph's physical appearance and cross-racial performances are so diverse that she is representative of almost everyone, and rarely offends anyone. There is less critical analysis of her roles, because her mixed ancestry adds believability rather than disconcerting privilege to her racially specific characters.[62] As black and mixed, Rudolph is part of two racial minority groups and is given more leeway to play a variety of races, yet when playing single-race black characters, Rudolph's performances are not viewed as controversial Blackface or minstrel performances—they are accepted because her black heritage is known. While there is little outcry over most cross-racial performances on *SNL*, African American impersonations are regularly done by African American performers even if they are not a close physical match or must be performed across genders.[63] In the twenty-first century, when *SNL's*

[61] Lauren A. Rubin, "The *SNL* Effect: Black Women in Film and TV," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 19, 2013, accessed June 8, 2015.

[62] For example, white comics in Blackface or Yellowface.

[63] See Lily Rothman, "Kerry Washington, Keenan Thompson, and Black Women on *SNL*," *Time*, October 17, 2013, accessed January 16, 2017. When *SNL* lacked any black female cast members, African American male cast members Keenan Thompson and Jay Pharoh impersonated black female celebrities. In 2013, Thompson said he would no longer play these characters.

producers cast non-black comedians to play black celebrities, major news outlets quickly responded with shock and frustration.[64]

Beltrán writes that during Rudolph's residency on *SNL*, her racially mixed background gave her "a figurative, all-encompassing fluidity."[65] None of Rudolph's routines were objectionable partly because they were "viewed by society as uncategorizable in relation to race."[66] Rudolph's mixed race helped her reach an extensive audience; her skin tone and physical and facial similarity to white Western beauty standards have been advantageous.[67] Not looking like one particular race helped her escape being pigeonholed, while letting her break away from "aggressive roles—the stereotypical neck rolling and finger snapping and even their weight (they are usually heavy)" that follow black female comedians with darker skin.[68] Dr. Jackson contends, "Maya Rudolph can get a pass because she can somewhat pass."[69] Coddett argues, Rudolph may have achieved longevity on the show due to her ease at passing for other races.[70] Beltrán writes, "attitudes about the acceptability of cross-racial performance by mixed-race performers are informed by viewers' reading of these actors."[71] Through Rudolph, *SNL* could project a more diverse image while using her versatility to showcase many more characters and celebrity impersonations. They could also capitalize on her likeability across audiences and audiences desire to see post-race images on screen.[72]

---

[64] See Maureen Ryan, "Shouldn't Obama Be Played By an African American on 'Saturday Night Live," *Chicago Tribune*, February 24, 2008, accessed January 16, 2017. See also Farhi.

[65] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 200.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Rubin. See also Cottom.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Coddett.

[71] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 200.

[72] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 193.

On *SNL*, Rudolph was often paired with comedian Fred Armisen whose mixed race background also afforded him a wide variety of characters and impersonations. Both repeatedly performed across races, but the media and *SNL*'s viewers were less critical of Rudolph playing African American or mixed African American. Though both identify as mixed, audiences tended to read Armisen as closer to white, i.e., ambiguous, and not necessarily a person of color.[73] In 2008, Armisen played Barack Obama, and Rudolph partnered with him as Michelle Obama in "Barack Obama Variety Half-Hour." For the three years that Armisen played the Illinois Senator and later President, he was referred to in the press as "Fauxbama" with his race often misrepresented, and his previous racial fluidity forgotten.[74] Daily newspaper and magazine headlines declared that *SNL* had finally gone too far in casting across race.[75] Furthermore, because Armisen was mistaken for "white," he was accused of engaging in blackface and minstrelsy.[76] According to critics, Armisen's mixed background was not an adequate substitute for black, and he was deemed *too white* to play black. His performance appeared as a throwback to Hollywood's early days when blacks were barred from the screen and whites played them using blackface.

Ironically, what was often overlooked was the fact that Armisen, a racially mixed comedian, was impersonating a racially mixed public figure, and that *SNL* had very few choices

---

[73] See Joshua Alston, "Is Blackface Ever Ok?" *Newsweek*, March 13, 2008, accessed January 10, 2017. Alston deems Armisen a "white actor," misconstruing his race and questioning if it is ever acceptable for whites to wear blackface. See also Paul Farhi, "Did 'SNL' Go Beyond the Pale with Fauxbama?" *The Washington Post*, February 29, 2008, accessed January 10, 2012. The outrage over Armisen playing Obama treats Armisen as if he were a white actor putting on Blackface rather than mixed-race like Obama.

[74] See Farhi's *Washington Post* article. *NPR* also deemed Armisen's *SNL* character Fauxbama. See Michel Martin, "Shop Guys: SNL 'Fauxbama' Impersonation Offensive?" *NPR*, February 29, 2008, accessed January 10, 2017.

[75] For example, respected news outlets that reacted negatively to Armisen as Obamas included *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *NPR*, among others.

[76] The lack of commentary on Rudolph's performance indicated acceptance of her impersonation.

for casting comedians of color.[77] Major news headlines responded to Armisen playing Obama by arguing that the role should have been given to an African American for believability, and to conform to political expectations of cross-racial performance. However, casting an African American comedian would fix only part of the problem. *SNL* could have cast Keenan Thompson, the lone black cast member, but Armisen was a closer physical match to Obama despite being lighter. Phillip Lamarr Cunningham argued that Keenan's "darker complexion and stout physique" would have contributed to "a less than convincing Obama."[78]

Some critics did deem it fair for Armisen to play Obama, since both are mixed, but others were "troubled that he was not at least half black."[79] Much of the outcry over *SNL*'s lack of racial sensitivity was based on misinformed perceptions of Armisen's race. It was rarely mentioned that Armisen identifies as, "half Venezuelan, one quarter Japanese, and one quarter German."[80] Obama's mixed race also often went unmentioned. Beltrán found few critics "emphasized that Obama himself is half white,"[81] and most also failed to note that Obama has more white ancestry than Armisen despite often identifying as and being characterized as solely black.[82]

While Armisen and *SNL* writers were chastised after the "Barack Obama Variety Half-Hour" aired, responses to mixed-race Rudolph playing African American Michelle Obama were

---

[77] When Armisen left in 2013, only 11 African American male comedians had been part of the *SNL* cast.

[78] Phillip Lamarr Cunningham, "Who's Going to Play Michelle Obama?: *Saturday Night Live* and its Lack of Women of Color," *Flow*, n.d., accessed August 6, 2015.

[79] "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 201.

[80] "Actor and Comedian Fred Armisen Plays Not My Job," *Wait Wait…Don't Tell Me*, Npr.org, December 21, 2012, accessed June 16, 2015.

[81] "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 203.

[82] See Jocelyn Guest, "The Comedian-in-Chief," *The Daily Beast*, November 20, 2008, accessed January 16, 2017. Obama is deemed America's first black president despite his ancestry. See Byron Tau, "Black Actor to Finally Play Obama on SNL," *Politico*, September 12, 2012, accessed January 16, 2017. Tau calls Obama the "first black president" but acknowledges that he is also half white.

benign.[83] "Rudolph appears to have been given a pass in her portrayal of Michelle Obama"[84] perhaps because, at the time, she was the only female on the roster who "reasonably could have played Michelle Obama."[85] The fact that Rudolph bore little resemblance to Michelle Obama did not disrupt enjoyment of her impersonation, in part because she had already been understood as black during her tenure on *SNL*.[86]

Cunningham was one of the few critics to racially separate Rudolph from *SNL*'s previous black female cast members, stating that Rudolph was more believable as a cross-racial performer than as Oprah Winfrey or Patti LaBelle. Beyond her comedic talent, Cunningham argued that Rudolph was cast in those roles "by default of being *SNL*'s only woman of color."[87] Unlike those who only saw problems with Armisen's cross-racial performance, Cunningham criticized *SNL* producers for hiring a primarily white cast and thus having little choice in assigning black characters to cast members. Essentially, there was no suitable cast member to believably play either Obama.[88] "As a major cultural production," he wrote, *SNL*'s "failure to embrace more racial and gender diversity perhaps does not threaten the show's relevance, but it undoubtedly undermines it."[89]

Instead of relying on a varied cast to take on the hundreds of characters and impersonations the show is famous for, mixed performers and guest stars have been heavily

---

[83] Rudolph was only mentioned in relation to her guest appearance. Since leaving *SNL* in 2007, Rudolph returned as a guest star in 2008, 2012, and 2015.

[84] "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 194.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Rudolph is consistently categorized as one of *SNL*'s sole black comedians. See "Black SNL Cast Members Through the Years," *The Root*, October 1, 2010, accessed January 11, 2017. See also "Black Comedians on SNL: Eddie Murphy to Sasheer Zamata," *BET*, n.d., accessed January 11, 2017.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Cunningham. "Since the 1980s, *SNL* has been quite successful at casting dead ringers for each president and first lady."

[89] Ibid.

utilized. Rudolph and Armisen (prior to the Fauxbama controversy) "were afforded great ethnic and racial fluidity on *SNL*."[90] Their cross-racial performances were copious; both have "ethnically ambiguous looks, the capacity to racially pass, and public knowledge of their mixed heritage."[91] They also have complexions light enough to increase their range, which is important since the majority of impersonations are of white celebrities. Because both identified as mixed and did not appear as one particular race, *SNL*'s audiences were rarely affronted when either actor performed outside of his or her own backgrounds . . . until Armisen played the historically significant figure Obama, and used skin-altering makeup to do so.[92]

White actors engaging in blackface or minstrelsy is taboo, but there is no collective agreement on whether members of other oppressed racial groups can perform blackness without it being offensive.[93] Further, it is rare to see mixed characters on TV, and there is little scholarship available on who should be permitted to perform mixed race. Despite being construed as half Asian or half Latino, Armisen's impersonation was still not received as appropriate. According to Beltrán, because Obama is often understood as primarily black, viewers would have to understand Armisen as having a "perceived relationship to blackness" for his portrayal of Obama to be a "politically inoffensive performance." [94] For instance, when Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson played a version of Obama, his impersonation did not generate criticism. Instead, Beltrán writes, it helped explain "the complicated dynamics of mixed-racial

---

[90] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 200.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Todd Boyd quoted in Farhi. See Bennett Marcus, "Fred Armisen Performs in 'Honeyface'," *New York Magazine*, March 13, 2008. Armisen is quoted as stating he turns himself into Obama with "shading on my eyebrows and plastic behind my ears . . . and a little bit of something called Honey, a honey color."

[93] However, Blackface continues to reappear in fashion and in pop culture. Blackface parties and events have taken place at schools nationwide. Also, while Blackface generates wide-scale criticism, Yellowface and Redface are still prevalent. The former can be found in music videos and on celebrity performers; the latter can be found among NFL fans of teams such as the Washington Redskins.

[94] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 201.

impersonation in contemporary media culture."[95] Since Johnson was a guest star and part black, his impersonation was not met with criticism. The lack of media disapproval showed that "presumably, he is viewed as 'black enough' to play Obama."[96] As part black Nova Scotian, and part Samoan, Johnson looks nothing like Obama, but was accepted as, "The Rock Obama," a massive, angry version of Armisen's jovial Obama, in part because Johnson's skin tone was a closer match. On screen, when Johnson's character's race is not indicated, it is often presumed to be mixed or black; therefore, because audience familiarity with mixed actors' backgrounds can factor into characters' believability and acceptability in playing certain roles, Johnson—who was familiar as a "black" character—was accepted as believably playing Obama, whereas Armisen—who had not been regularly coded as black in other roles—was not.

Since Rudolph, Armisen, and Johnson made their ancestries public, it is more understandable when they perform across races, when compared to mixed performers who do not readily acknowledge their racial backgrounds.[97] While Armisen may have ventured too far by impersonating Obama, audiences are complacent when he plays white characters. Rudolph is rarely criticized for moving between races or taking roles detached from race. Johnson, however, despite his acceptance as a "Hulk" Obama, has been deemed not black enough and not white enough many times and is rarely viewed as race-neutral due to his skin tone and appearance.[98]

---

[95] Beltrán, "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama'," 202. Also, due to Obama's historical and cultural significance, arguably anyone who was not accepted or known as a black performer would be criticized for playing him, especially if it required changing their skin color.

[96] Ibid., 203.

[97] There are numerous websites and web articles centering on "outing" mixed-race celebrities. See: Daniella Cabrera, "18 Mixed Race Celebrities Who Are Diversifying Hollywood," *Bustle*, November 19, 2014, accessed January 16, 2016. Both Rudolph and Jones are featured on this list. Meg Butler, "15 Celebrities Most People Don't Know Are Black," *Madame Noir*, September 18, 2013, accessed January 16, 2017. This slideshow also includes Rudolph and Jones. Miranda Larbi, "28 Celebrities You Probably Didn't Know Were Mixed-Race," *Buzzfeed*, December 2, 2015, accessed January 16, 2016.

[98] Johnson starred in two films released one month apart where his characters were meant to have different racial backgrounds. In the crime drama *Snitch* (February, 2013), Johnson's character, John Matthews, was white,

Similar to Rudolph, Johnson was not initially a film star, but now both regularly secure featured or lead roles playing a variety of races.[99]

Rudolph and Johnson have backgrounds that help them to fit into multiple categories. They stand for positive associations of mixed and post-race, since neither hides their ancestry, yet that ancestry is often inconsequential because their ambiguity gives them leeway to perform cross-racially. Further, they can add diversity to a production while also keeping it from being viewed as a racially specific or "black" movie. However, there has been recent press about the political nature of Johnson's racial erasure. *Atlanta Blackstar* writer Jasmine Nelson admonishes Hollywood for its race-neutral casting of Johnson, arguing that producers do not accept his background, "ignoring it altogether and pretending he doesn't have one."[100] Nelson posits that Johnson and other mixed stars[101] are "packaged as 'other'" to make them "acceptable despite being Black men in leading mainstream roles."[102] Sergio, author of *Shadow and Act: On Cinema Of the African Diaspora*, ponders whether Johnson's transcending racial categories is "a genuine sign of progress, or is it just an easy way to avoid dealing with the serious issues of racism and

---

primarily evidenced by his white son. In the sci-fi action film *G.I. Joe Retaliation*, released in March 2013, Johnson's character, Roadblock, is intended to be understood as black, reaffirmed by his two black daughters and his black neighborhood. In 2015, Johnson starred in the action thriller *San Andreas,* where his race was not discussed, but he was conceivably meant to be mixed or ambiguous due to his daughters being white. His movement between races increases his marketability and box office success. However, not all critics are comfortable with the post-race image he is used to depict.

[99] Rudolph still performs sketch comedy as a guest on *SNL* and was the host of her own variety show. Johnson still participates in professional wrestling matches as "The Rock."

[100] Jasmine Nelson, "Is Dwayne Johnson Black? Hollywood Doesn't Seem to Think So," *Atlanta Blackstar*, June 10, 2015, accessed July 6, 2015.

[101] For example, Vin Diesel. See Natalie Robehmed, "Vin Diesel: The Film Star of the Future," *Forbes*, June 29, 2015, accessed December 17, 2015. *Forbes* deemed Diesel, "The Film Star of the Future," stating that "his Achilles heel has become his greatest strength." He was one of the highest paid actors of 2015. He states, "The whole point [of *The Fast and the Furious*] was to diversity Hollywood and in some ways change the face of Hollywood," which he and his multiracial cast-mates have done with great success.

[102] Ibid.

intolerance that still linger."[103] Rudolph's linear career presents similarities to Johnson's . . . and suggests the latter.

During her *SNL* run, Rudolph's most noteworthy film role was the racially mixed lead female in Mike Judge's controversial, under-distributed, and later cult classic[104] *Idiocracy* (2006).[105] As Rita, she played opposite Luke Wilson's Joe Bauers. In the film, Rita and Joe are selected for a government project to be frozen for a year then evaluated. The two are chosen due to being of completely average intelligence. However, the project is abandoned early, the subjects forgotten, and Joe and Rita do not wake up until 500 years in the future. By that time, humans have severely regressed, corporations have taken over, the planet is covered in garbage, and the two are the most intelligent people alive.

The film was a box-office failure, yet film reviewers did not miss the underlying commentary on the toxic state of American society. Josh Tyler deemed it "a hilarious all-out assault on the future's culture" and a "biting criticism of our own."[106] David Fear described the film as "Judge's version of the future – a landscape of staggering vulgarity and franchising run amok" depicting the "profoundly stupid."[107] Joe Giambrone acknowledged that such a critique "could have potentially alienated its own potential audience" since "the target could be considered stupid people, even people of average intelligence who live meaningless lives of convenience . . . this may have been too close to home for a large swath of American movie

[103] Sergio, "2013 S&A Highlights: Dwayne Johnson – 'Race Shifter' In a Post Racial World?" *Shadow and Act*, January 3, 2014, accessed July 6, 2015.

[104] David Fear, "Darwin, Dar-Lose: The Genius of '*Idiocracy*'," *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 2014, accessed January 6, 2016.

[105] *Idiocracy*, directed by Mike Judge (20th Century Fox, 2007), DVD.

[106] Josh Tyler, "*Idiocracy* Review," *Cinemablend*, n.d., accessed January 6, 2016.

[107] Fear.

ticket purchasers."[108] The film was also widely disliked by its distributor, 20th Century Fox. It had no promo ads or trailers, and opened in only seven U.S. cities. It was shown in 130 theaters and grossed a mere $495,303 worldwide.[109]

Rita's screen time was brief, yet her racially mixed identity was a defining feature (unlike the way it would be in much of Rudolph's later work).[110] Her background was contextualized through traits that could be read as black due to the way blackness is regularly portrayed on screen.[111] She was deemed to have only average intelligence, and her lifestyle relied on negative caricatures of African American women that were regularly seen in sketch comedy and on screen. For instance, Rita is an uneducated sex worker, dates her pimp-boyfriend, and has a criminal record. Her trouble with the law, willingness to follow her pimp's demands, and her race and gender made her a perfect candidate for the experiment. Joe is the film's primary focus, and in the end, he and Rita marry and, because their painfully average intelligence in 2005 is brilliance in 2505, have the world's smartest children.

As Rita, Rudolph played a racially specific mixed-race black character in a lead role. Rita contrasts with Rudolph's subsequent lead characters for a number of reasons. First, the way race informed Rita's character resulted in her black identity being comprised of stereotypical traits. Second, the other lead roles that were mixed race were not culturally black, and by virtue of their lack of racial attributes and their integration into white social worlds, they appeared raceless.

---

[108] Joe Giambrone, "*Idiocracy* (2006) Re-visited," *Counterpunch*, June 3, 2011, accessed January 6, 2016.

[109] Information courtesy of Box Office Mojo. Used with permission, accessed January 14, 2016.

[110] But it won't be forgotten anytime soon. See Matt Novak, "*Idiocracy* is a Cruel Movie and You Should Be Ashamed for Liking it," *Paleofuture*, July 29, 2014, accessed January 6, 2016. The term seems to have picked up steam again in the criticism of Donald Trump's current presidential campaign. The film's title is often used in today's vernacular. "Idiocracy" is the "new cultural touchstone for discussing America's cultural and educational decline . . . people are referencing the film in some capacity about 5-10 times an hour on social media."

[111] See above for examples of prevalent stereotypes of black females on screen, and see analysis of *SNL*'s black female characters.

Connecting Rita's racial background to the film is significant, yet her character is problematic because she is primarily represented by her low intelligence, a common way of stereotyping black women on-screen. Consequently, Rita is only able to be viewed as smart after the world has severely regressed. In one of the few roles where Rudolph does not play raceless, she instead plays a fraught representation of a mixed black character.

Post *SNL*: Success as a Black and Mixed-Race Actress While Playing Any or No Race

By embracing a black identity and privileging her mixed race, Rudolph expresses optimistic views of racial mixture that align with twenty-first century fascination with and media attention on mixed individuals.[112] In a 2009 interview, Rudolph exclaimed, "I still can't believe we have a president who is mixed like me."[113] She then identified as mixed over black when she stated, "People say I'm African American but that doesn't include the other half of me."[114]

Rudolph's discomfort with being racially classified, especially as a single race, was apparent in *The Black List, Vol. 2*. (2009), an HBO documentary in which black celebrities spoke about the challenging and rewarding aspects of being black in the United States. Rudolph's participation was based on her African American ancestry, yet in her brief appearance, she remarked, "I don't feel black. I don't feel white."[115] She also did not like the alternative, "other,"

[112] See Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, *Crossing Black*, 2. "Media attention on mixed race focuses on beauty and 'blending'."

[113] Admin, "On Identifying with Our Biracial President: Maya Rudolph," *MixedRemixed*, December 8, 2014, accessed April 15, 2015.

[114] Ibid.

[115] James Poniewozik, "TV Tonight: Black (Or Not) Like She," *Time*, February 26, 2009, accessed June 8, 2015.

since she is "black . . . and Jewish . . . all of those things. None of them are dominant."[116] Thus, Rudolph does not view race as singular or completely defining.

Rudolph has assembled an impressive body of work, but thus far she has not taken on unequivocally black characters in leading roles.[117] Usually, when Rudolph's characters are part black, the only clues revealing their black ancestry are brief interactions with black family members. She is coded as black in only a few roles, in which she typically plays minor characters.[118] For instance in 2010, Rudolph was part of the ensemble cast of the slapstick comedy *Grown Ups*,[119] a film about a boys' basketball team from the 1970s that reunites 30 years later. The majority of the lead roles as well as several supporting roles were filled by former *SNL* cast members. Rudolph had a small role as Deanne McKenzie, opposite Chris Rock as Kurt McKenzie. Deanne's appearances were brief, since the film's focus was on the former teammates; wives and kids only provided context for their current lives. Deanne's scenes highlighted Rudolph's ability to push the boundaries with characters to make them both crazier and funnier.[120] Playing Deanne, she engaged in slapstick comedy by pulling pranks and engaging in bodily humor. Deanne's black kids and mom helped code her as black, and with Kurt, she poked fun at their token status and the whiteness of their friends and his hometown.

---

[116] Ibid.

[117] In *Idiocracy*, Rudolph played a mixed race black character and mentions having a black boyfriend (shown in photographs), the two do not interact on screen.

[118] See Tom Lamont, "Maya Rudolph: I'm Not a Woman in Comedy. I'm a Comedian," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2015, accessed December 8, 2015. Rudolph's first role in a major Hollywood production was in 2004's *Anchorman*. "I was a bank robber, with an afro, and I had a good joke about a diaper." The mention of having an afro and the early stage of Rudolph's career can imply that she was playing a black character; however, all of her scenes were cut before the film was released.

[119] *Grown Ups*, directed by Dennis Dugan (Columbia Pictures, 2010). Rudolph was also part of the cast of *Grown Ups 2*.

[120] See Ana Santopinto, "My, Oh Maya: Maya Rudolph," *Paper*, February 28, 2003, accessed January 15, 2017.

In *Grown Ups* (and *Grown Ups 2*), little is known about Deanne beyond her marriage to Kurt. Deanne is a confident working mother, contrasted with Kurt, a (feminized) stay-at-home dad—a role reversal that is used repeatedly for laughs. Having a black wife is significant, because Kurt grew up in a town where he was one of only two black kids.[121] His cultural blackness has been questionable; he does not have traits that coincide with stereotypical blackness, the only kind that his small community is familiar with. As a kid, Kurt was mocked for his lanky frame and not being physically tough, and now he is chastised for not having a job and emasculated when he wants more attention from Deanne. Kurt and Deanne's relationship improves over the course of the film, and by the end she is happier with him, yet she still adheres to her dominant role by asking if she can take him out for date night (he accepts on the condition that it does not conflict with his watching *Grey's Anatomy*). As they slow dance, one of the few instances where they touch, Kurt says, "Look at you, all sexy. . . . You should change your name to Deyonce."[122] When Deanne questions his sincerity, Kurt asks, "Can't I just enjoy a dance with my fine ass wife?"[123] She replies, "To the whitest song ever?" joking that they are the only black adults in the very white town.

As Deanne, Rudolph plays a character whose black identity is readily understood, a departure from most of her work post-*SNL*. She is identified as a black character who is at home in both black and white worlds. She also acknowledges her racial difference from her friends, something that is unspoken in many of Rudolph's other on-screen roles.[124] Being paired with

[121] Mixed actor Rob Schneider plays Rob, a mixed-race Filipino, evident from childhood photos, comments made by his friends, and his three daughters (one white, one Asian, and one that looks mixed and very similar to Rob). Salma Hayek has the most significant female role in the film, and many racially based jokes are made about her Spanish accent, bilingualism, and fiery personality.

[122] *Grown Ups*.

[123] Ibid.

[124] With the exception of *Away We Go*.

Rock is also significant in that it shows a stable black marriage.[125] Despite minimal screen time, the couple moves from tense interactions to more loving encounters. While the film achieved domestic ($162,001,168) and international ($109,429,003) box office success, mainly due to its all-star cast, reviews ranged from mixed to negative (it earned a 10% critics rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, but audiences rated it 62%).[126] The cast reunited in 2013 for *Grown Ups 2*. The sequel, less successful than the first, still earned $133,668,525 at domestic box offices, and $113,315,753 abroad. Like the first, it was disparaged by critics; its rating is 7% on *Rotten Tomatoes* while audiences gave it 53%.[127]

Rudolph's more significant film roles after *SNL* varied greatly in their racial coding and whether they dealt with or ignored race.[128] Her debut lead role was as a part-black character, Verona De Tassant, in Sam Mendes' *Away We Go* (2009).[129] There, she was paired with John Krasinski as Burt Farlander. Race is not a notable theme in the film, but is integral to Verona's life. Verona remains Rudolph's most significant lead role in a Hollywood film in which her racial background is made into an intricate part of her character's identity.

Verona's race is confirmed early on in the film, giving her a definitive mixed black and white identity that Rudolph's characters often lack. When we meet the quirky couple with modest resources, 34-year-old Verona is six months pregnant, and they are about to leave their

[125] The only one in any of the roles that Rudolph, Newton, or Jones performed.

[126] Information courtesy of *Box Office Mojo*. Used with permission. Critics' ratings courtesy of *Rotten Tomatoes* website.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Beyond *SNL*, and prior to *Bridesmaids* fame, Rudolph's film career included voicing characters for animated films and small parts in feature films.

[129] *Away We Go*, directed by Sam Mendes (Focus Features, 2010), DVD. Acclaimed writers Dave Eggers and Vendela Vida wrote the screenplay for *Away We Go*, and wrote Verona with Rudolph in mind.

home in rural Colorado to embark on a North American journey in search of a new home.[130] Blatant questions regarding the race of her soon-to-be child reveal her mixed background. Being shown with her sister places Verona in a mixed family, and their dialogue about their parents lets viewers get to know Verona.

An early scene with Verona and Burt's mother, Gloria Farlander (Catherine O'Hara), highlights the quirkiness of the all-white friends and family who are important to Verona and Burt; in this scene (and others), their lack of tact when discussing race is also emphasized.[131] Upon seeing Verona and Burt arrive at the Farlanders' home, Gloria rushes outside, her teased and tangled hair swinging. She wears a low-cut, long-sleeved, flower-patterned tunic, grey pants, and a low-slung thick brown leather belt. Walking toward the couple, unable to contain her excitement, she points and loudly exclaims over Verona's size, using big gestures that complement her colorful personality. As soon as they enter the Farlanders' living room, Gloria insists on hearing the baby's heartbeat. She leads Verona to the couch, and despite Verona's hesitation, she immediately puts her head on Verona's protruding stomach, awkwardly crouching over her, one knee on and the other off the couch. Verona is mildly charmed and a little uncomfortable as she reclines on the couch. Gloria keeps her head on Verona stomach, even after Burt and his father Jerry (Jeff Daniels) enter the room. Practically lying on Verona, Gloria asks, "Verona, do you think she's gonna look like you?"[132] Verona replies, "Well, I hope so. I think I'm the mom."[133] Gloria then declares, "Well I just want a little Verona,"[134] after which she faces

[130] Krasinski was also Jones' love interest on *The Office*. Both Jones and Rudolph's characters are questioned about their racial identities while dating or partnered with Krasinski.

[131] Verona's sister is the one non-white person close to the couple.

[132] *Away We Go*.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Ibid.

her husband and son and, still using Verona as a pillow, quickly asks, "And just how black do you think she'll be?" She ends the question with an anxious smile, knowing she has embarrassed her son and husband.[135] They both express mild shock at Gloria's forwardness, and Verona's eyes grow big, mouth dropping open. Still playful, she replies, "Wow, I don't know . . . maybe we can leave her out in the sun for a couple of days, expedite things."[136] Verona's playing along with Gloria affirms her part-black ancestry and assures the Farlanders that race can be lightly discussed; it is not a serious concern.

Since *Away We Go* reflects the twenty-first century's purported post-race outlook, and because the characters are already full of other peculiar quirks, Verona is taken aback but not truly offended by Gloria's questions.[137] Gloria's racially specific queries about Burt and Verona's baby come off as idiosyncratic rather than stemming from disapproval of the baby's mixed race; the questions also work to mock seemingly progressive white people who have difficulty discussing race. What transpires between Verona and Gloria is an awkward discussion of race, but also alternately, a humorous exchange that emphasizes the mild yet lingering discomfort regarding interracial sex and mixed race. The verbal banter inserts racial issues into the scene, and while race is present in this particular exchange, it is not a main theme in the film.

Gloria's inappropriateness contrasts with politically correct norms and generates laughs; however, some film critics defend Gloria's questions regarding race as stemming from a natural curiosity regarding mixed-race individuals. Roger Ebert and Laura Clifford interpreted Gloria's question "And just how black do you think she'll be?" as benign, not derived from racial

---

[135] Ibid.

[136] *Away We Go*.

[137] However, later in the film, Burt's entitled childhood friend, L.N. makes an uncomfortable remark about Verona's hair and later pointedly asks, "I was just wondering how much your Mama was able to pass on to you. Your people have such a wonderful oral tradition." Verona can only stare at her in disbelief while Burt is enraged on her behalf.

discomfort.[138] Ebert and Clifford both attribute her query to simple curiosity, not to make race an issue. However, Ebert's review is problematic because he rephrases Gloria's question as, "Will the baby be black?"[139] This question is more understandable as one asked out of sheer interest, as it does not place an expectation on Verona to account for how her race will figure into the baby's appearance. In Ebert's review, race has meaning but does not require further analysis. He writes, "Parents on both sides of an interracial couple would naturally wonder, and the film's ability to ask the question is not racist, but matter of fact in an America slowly growing tolerant," and such questions "reflect a society in which race is no longer the primary defining characteristic."[140] Yet, bringing race to the surface only to dismiss it as a non-issue demeans its importance for characters such as Verona, the only person of color among the Farlanders. Gloria does not ask how white the baby will be, revealing the workings of white privilege and the acceptance of white as the standard.

Verona and the Farlanders' casual treatment of race highlights how mixed individuals can be detached from their non-white racial identity. For instance, in an interview for *Women and Hollywood*, Rudolph distances herself from political discussions about African American women in film, stating, "race is just not a part of the way I look at the world and the way I live my life."[141] Rudolph also comments on the way the writers of *Away We Go* quietly dealt with race: "Verona is mixed and Burt is white but nobody talks about it. That felt realistic to me in my day-to-day life."[142] Rudolph's interpretation of race in *Away We Go* fits into the early twenty-first

[138] Roger Ebert, "Away We Go," *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 10, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011; Laura Clifford, "Away We Go," *Reelingreviews*, n.d., accessed May 6, 2011.

[139] Ebert, "Away We Go."

[140] Ibid.

[141] Silverstein.

[142] Ibid.

century's post-race mentality, which puts less significance on racial identity and racial differences.[143]

While the writers and reviewers of *Away We Go* only scratched the surface of talking about race, developing mixed-race characters meant that race could be included despite not being one of the film's primary themes. Carmen Ejogo, a Nigerian and Scottish actress who plays Verona's sister, Grace De Tassant, viewed race as playing both a silent and an active role in the film. Through the sisters and the interracial relationship between Verona and Burt, race was at the forefront of the film. However, unlike films where the focus of the romantic relationship was on its interracial component, here Verona and Burt's focus was on where to start their family. In an interview with Cassam Looch, Ejogo states that race exists, "but it's only an issue if the audience chooses to make an issue out of it."[144] In this film, the mixed-race black characters are fully developed and not defined primarily by their racial background. Ejogo declares, "mixed people, black people . . . are being given the space to be idiosyncratic, and have a breadth of emotions, and not be related back to how that is informed by your being black."[145] Removing race as the defining aspect of the characters' lives was refreshing to Ejogo. Ironically, in the shift away from race, Ejogo feels that a place has been created for her as a mixed actress. She believes films like *Away We Go* indicate there will be more quality roles for mixed actors. "It's really liberating to see a piece of material like this out in the world. . . . I've been craving this stuff my

[143] Liberal discussions of race can include mentioning it to show it can be talked about in a non-discriminatory way and that we have reached a point where some discussion is possible.

[144] Cassam Looch, "Interview: Carmen Ejogo," *Movievortex,* n.d., accessed May 17, 2011.

[145] Kathy Rich. "Interview: Away We Go's Carmen Ejogo." *Cinemablend,* June 2, 2009, accessed August 6, 2015. Ejogo's post-race stance mirrors her excitement over Barack Obama's election and her views on race shaped by her life in England. Similar to Newton, not having grown up around America's hostile race relations gave Ejogo a different perspective on race. Though Ejogo could play various races, in the United States, prior to *Away We Go*, her range was limited, since she was often only cast as African American. Ejogo states, "I'm mixed, yes, but in the world I'm defined as black before I'm defined white."

whole career and there has not been enough. . . . I don't see myself in so many characters in film and I think that's changing with films like this."[146]

Grace's presence keeps the film from obscuring Verona's race. Without a close relative for Verona, *Away We Go* might look more like *I Love You, Man,* where Zooey was coded as racially neutral or white and had no family to contextualize her background. Here, Grace and Verona share a scene alone and discuss their parents, which furthers Verona's character development. Unlike Zooey (or Lillian, in *Bridesmaids*), Verona has a family member who looks like her and shares her history. When the sisters hold each other, their visual similarities are emphasized. Writing mixed individuals with traits beyond common stereotypes shows racial complexities that *I Love You Man, Crash, For Colored Girls,* and *Bridesmaids* lack.[147]

At first glance, *Away We Go* presents a plot with similarities to *I Love You, Man* and loose tragic mulatta narratives (i.e., a mixed-race orphan is in a serious romantic relationship with a white man who might help her reinvent her life). Verona and Zooey are both parentless; Zooey's lack of family ties is vaguely referenced, while Verona mentions that her parents are dead fairly early on and later says they died when she was twenty-two. However, being without parents shapes Verona's relationship with Burt but does not make her a victim. Burt and their soon-to-be child will provide her with a family (outside of her Grace), yet she does not need to be redeemed through a wedding ceremony. Verona decides her future: she happily chooses pregnancy while rejecting marriage in favor of an eternal partnership.

Verona determines the boundaries of her romantic relationship as an equal partner, and Burt respects her decisions. She has suffered hardship but does not need to be saved. She defies

[146] Ibid.

[147] Showing Verona's parents, even in flashbacks, would have been one more way of showing mixed-race individuals with legitimate families.

tragic mulatta stereotypes and is presumably free of internal struggle over her racial identity. There is no reason to pity her. In fact, Rudolph posits that Verona "saves" Burt through acceptance of and love for him.[148] She told Mali Elfman of *ScreenCrave*, "I feel like Burt's really alive when he's with Verona . . . he kind of exists because of her."[149] As they lie in a motel bed after their first day in Phoenix, the open window shades reveal the moon and car lights in the distance, and soft guitar music plays. Burt moves close to Verona, puts his arm around her, and uses his palm to gently rub her stomach. Eyes closed, and with a sleepy smile, he says, "You're my life, Verona, my sky."[150]

Since Verona is multi-dimensional, her relationship with Burt is complex; the two characters experience moments of tenderness and vulnerability in addition to quirky banter, all mixed in with their intercontinental journey. Falling back on classic stereotypes of mixed figures would take away from the believability of Burt and Verona's mutual love and appreciation.[151] For instance, worrying about where they will live and who will help them take care of the baby, Verona turns to Burt, tearfully asking, "No one's in love like us, right? What are we going to do?"[152] Burt tenderly strokes her cheek and answers, "Nothing, we're just gonna ride it out."[153] As they look at each other with admiration and uncertainty, their love is palpable. Soon they both begin to smile. Instead of telling Verona he will take care of her, Burt paints them on a journey together.

---

[148] Mali Elfman, "Maya Rudolph Interview for Away We Go," *ScreenCrave*, June 4, 2009, accessed May 12, 2011.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Away We Go.

[151] Stereotypes of mixed women on screen include being fetishized, eroticized, illicit, or being too racially distinct to be a serious romantic partner of a white lead actor.

[152] *Away We Go.*

[153] Ibid.

Verona's vulnerability and close relationships to others beyond Burt add to her complexity. When Verona visits Grace in Tucson, Arizona, Grace and Verona's interactions are emotionally charged, infused with racial meaning, and move the narrative forward; through their conversations we learn how they individually and collectively respond to issues of family and loss.[154] Their close relationship and Verona's desire to live near Grace reiterate the importance of the journey. While shopping for a Jacuzzi in a bathtub showroom, Grace tells Verona to get inside a large white tub with her. Grace sits behind Verona who leans back into her sister. The camera frames them, closing in on their faces. Grace keeps her hand on Verona's shoulder, and their faces nearly touch as they talk quietly. Their skin and hair color is almost identical; both have golden brown curls, brown eyes, and full lips. Verona's makeup is much softer and her hair is longer and tied back, but otherwise they resemble one another and stand apart from other characters. As Verona listens to Grace talk freely about their parents, Grace tells Verona the spirit of their parents will live on in Verona's baby. "You're bringing them back in a little way."[155] This intimate conversation about Verona and her multiple roles as daughter, sister, mother-to-be, and partner give her depth that is missing from many of the mixed characters Rudolph plays.[156]

Due to loyalty and guilt, Verona chooses lifelong partnership with Burt rather than go through a wedding ceremony without her parents. In the closing scene of *I Love You, Man*,[157] Zoe's new white family stands in for her missing relatives. Here, marriage, and an extended

[154] The backgrounds of the viewers may influence their appreciation for this rare film with a mixed actress playing a character of the same background, comfortable in her identity but not consumed by it.

[155] *Away We Go.*

[156] For example, Rita, Lillian, Ava. *Away We Go*'s serious moments, which many of Rudolph's comedic films lack, include discussion of family. In roles that do not feature Rudolph as a complex mixed-race character, there is little screen time given to dealing with racial identity and family history.

[157] *Bridesmaids* also ends with a wedding.

white family will not make up for Verona's loss. Her rejection of convention departs from tragic mulatta stories and Hollywood romances. Her assertiveness in choosing not to have a wedding shows independence and the importance she places on the memory of her parents. By accepting Verona's decision, Burt respects her wishes despite his disappointment.

The ending in *Away We Go*, though not marriage, is the beginning of a new chapter in Verona and Burt's life together. Their travels end with their arrival at Verona's childhood home in South Carolina where her family's history resides. Burt will become a part of Verona's family, even if they are not physically present. Though critics and Rudolph viewed Verona's race as insignificant, Verona can bring Burt into her world because her background is fully known.[158]

In this original and timely film about an unconventional relationship, questions about race are momentarily broached and often dismissed as irrelevant, yet they shape some of the characters' opinions as well as the narrative.[159] However, the post-racial attitude the film takes requires a mixed-race character to confirm that race does not really matter. *Away We Go*'s relatively light tone regarding racial issues is also predicated on its lack of non-white characters.[160] Despite a more progressive partnership and an alternative outcome for its racially mixed lead, *Away We Go* still shies away from a diverse cast that would give Verona more connection to her history and add complexity to conversations about race.

Nevertheless, *Away We Go* is unusual in the way it codes mixed leads; unlike many other films, it acknowledges racial differences and mixed race, and the lead character asserts her

[158] In *I Love You, Man* and *Bridesmaids,* only the lead male's family is given significant screen time. In the former, Peter's brother and parents make several appearances; in the latter, Dougie's sister is part of Lillian's wedding party and becomes friends with Annie.

[159] Burt's childhood friend, L.N., is a parody of a privileged and entitled white woman employing only New Age techniques to raise her children. Deeming herself and her husband financially and educationally superior to Burt and Verona, in a patronizing voice, she feigns interest in Verona's past, her dead mother, and other attributes of her African ancestry that Verona's baby will miss out on.

[160] In Montreal, Verona and Burt reunite with college friends who have adopted several children of different races. However, their racial backgrounds are not discussed.

African American identity. Furthermore, a mixed woman is the most multifaceted and pivotal character in the film, and she makes decisions based on—rather than in spite of—her identity. Specifically, Verona's decision to reject marriage but pay tribute to her ancestral family and the family she is creating is rooted in her identity.

Away We Go also put a new spin on relationships, which contrasts with Hollywood's conventional rom-com plots. The film earned a 67% critics rating on *Rotten Tomatoes,* but its limited release made it appear more like an independent film rather than a production by Focus Features. It opened on just four screens nationwide (eventually showing on 506) and only played for ten weeks. It did not break even on its $17 million budget, generating only $14,899,417 worldwide. Audiences gave the film 73% on *Rotten Tomatoes,* indicating its success may have increased with a longer run or larger release. While *Away We Go* made new inroads for mixed actresses playing mixed characters, the film had limited viewings compared to Rudolph's works where her mixed characters are detached from race.

The Versatility of Mixed-Race: Rudolph's 2011 Performances

Rudolph's racial fluidity is a rarity for film and television performers; it is more familiar in sketch comedy where comics are expected to take on multiple personas. Rudolph's notoriety for performing any and all races meant that she was not necessarily expected to play a specific race, and so she was not constricted by race. Further, Rudolph could play multiple races at once, and each could be successful. Todd Aaron Johnson deemed Rudolph a "bona fide chameleon . . . a mistress of disguise, capable of playing any ethnicity."[161] Known for over a decade as a cross-racial performer, Rudolph was able to embody characters with distinct backgrounds and make

[161] Todd Aaron Johnson, "Maya Rudolph on Life, Laughs, & Wigging Out (Interview)," *Biography.com,* August 18, 2016, accessed January 18, 2017.

each "equally convincing."[162] Further, Rudolph's contribution to each major production in 2011 centered on her comedy. Of her days of performing tens of characters on *SNL*, Rudolph told Todd Aaron Johnson, "A lot of people aren't really sure what I am: is she white or black . . . so I got to play all of those things."[163] The race of her characters could be incorporated into—or left out of—her roles, and it would not take away from the strength of her performance. African American comedian, Marina Franklin comments, "The whole goal in comedy is to do things without always being labeled as the black act or the female act. You want to just be labeled as funny or good. Maya does that effortlessly."[164]

By 2011, audiences were familiar with Rudolph's playing various races or none at all, and her characters were significant to the overarching themes of the productions, and always provided laughs. After having taken on black and mixed roles in Hollywood films, Rudolph spent her next season playing three different characters with three distinct backgrounds; mixed black and white, raceless, and ambiguous. Each character had some distance from a fully defined black identity, was paired with a white romantic interest, and appeared in a film or television show in which Rudolph was the sole non-white actress.

In 2011's *Bridesmaids*, Rudolph played Lillian, a mixed woman with only incidental connections to her African American identity. Living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Lillian was immersed in a white social world. Unlike most films centered on an impending wedding, *Bridesmaids* does not focus on the engaged couple, but on a close female friendship between the bride-to-be, Lillian, and her maid-of honor, Annie (Kristen Wiig). In this film, the romantic relationship is secondary; the impending wedding serves to put the protagonists' friendship to the

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Chris Witherspoon, "Maya Rudolph Defies Racial Types in 'Bridesmaids'," *theGrio*, May 13, 2011, accessed June 8, 2015.

test. The film is told through Annie's perspective, and so Lillian only appears in scenes with Annie. When their friendship becomes rocky, the narrative focuses on Annie's breakdown and transformation, and Lillian is absent.

Bridesmaids is a shockingly funny look at outrageous preparations for an ostentatious wedding. It is also about the changes a lifelong friendship undergoes as one friend plans to wed, move away, and join a more financially privileged social circle. Socioeconomic differences become divisive, and Annie, as Lillian's maid of honor, is increasingly marginalized when she cannot fully participate in the lavish celebration and events leading up to it. Annie's insecurity causes a feud with Lillian's new wealthy friend Helen (Rose Byrne). Both Annie and Helen hilariously struggle to one-up the other and please Lillian to earn the coveted role as her closest friend. The wedding ensemble, all white friends and family members, face comical hurdles in their attempts to plan the perfect celebration.

Lillian is coded as mixed-race at the engagement party, which differentiates her from her friends, but does not disrupt her race-neutral life, since her identity and ancestry are never explicitly mentioned.[165] At the party, Lillian's immediate family and a sprinkling of African American guests provide the only hint at her mixed background. Lillian's parents are both present, and her African American father is the focus of attention as he toasts her and his soon-to-be son-in-law, Dougie. Seeing Lillian with a black father and white mother codes her as mixed, but since race has nothing to do with the storyline, it is only evident when Lillian's father speaks, or when her relatives appear as silent extras.[166] Further, Lillian is not shown speaking

[165] In films where Rudolph has a lead or featured role, her characters often have a racially mixed background that matches hers, but since the films do not have race as a primary component and/or she plays the only non-white character, her race is not discussed at length.

[166] He is the only African American with a speaking role other than a fitness trainer who yells at Annie and Lillian when they try to take his class without paying.

with any friends or family members who are not white. However, coding Lillian as mixed despite her relationship with a white man means that race is not completely ignored. Further, her racial mixture is not covered, nor is it associated with tragedy, as was the case for the mixed characters Rudolph played in the films analyzed above. By explicitly coding Lillian in this scene, viewers are freed from playing "racial detective" or reading the lead as ambiguously white.[167]

High socioeconomic class defines Lillian's new lifestyle.[168] At the engagement party, her father remarks about the high cost of the wedding, revealing that Dougie's family is paying for most of it.[169] Like Helen and Dougie's families, Lillian dresses in sophisticated, elegant clothing; the engagement party thrown by Helen is extravagant; and Lillian orders a custom made bridal gown from France. Another clue that reveals her elevated socioeconomic status is her unshared apartment, which contrasts her with her old friend Annie, who is unable to afford living on her own.[170] Lillian is also at ease with large amounts of spending for her wedding, and is slightly embarrassed when Annie suggests an inexpensive restaurant for the bridal party's lunch.

The absence of even a single friend or family member of color in Lillian's wedding party is conspicuous, yet very few critics discussed this omission, choosing instead to praise the film for breaking barriers for women in comedy. Reviewers who did mention the complete whiteness of the bridal party simply noted, with minor frustration or seemingly genuine surprise, that despite Lillian's mixed race, she did not have close friends of color. *Racialicious*[171] editor Latoya Peterson was more critical, writing, "I want to comment on the dearth of female fronted and

[167] It would be more realistic if there were racial diversity within Lillian's friends and party guests.

[168] Lillian's white social world was unsettling for fans of Rudolph. However, since *Bridesmaids* is set in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, there is a larger white population.

[169] At the engagement party, Lillian's father makes several remarks about the cost of the impending wedding, revealing that it is Dougie's family that has more disposable income for supporting the event.

[170] At the beginning of the film, Annie lives with two roommates, but after losing her job she is forced to move in with her mom.

[171] An online forum that is a "no-holds-barred critique of questionable media representation."

female written comedies, but I'm blinded by the bride's all white social circle."[172] However, Peterson's annoyance was partially tempered by Rudolph's starring role; the positive step for women in comedy almost excuses the lack of diversity.

Most American media applauded the gender obstacles that *Bridesmaids* disrupted, and ignored discussions of race.[173] In "Notes on the Film *Bridesmaids*," Don Perlgut, an Australian blogger who focuses on culture and politics, comments, "The most fascinating thing is: There is not one mention of [Lillian's] background in the film,"[174] and, instead of viewing this omission as whitening a film that could have been cast with actors of color, Perlgut praises the post-racial representation. The '"colour-blind' casting – and the decision by the writers/directors/producers not to mention her racial background – is very Obama post-modern (as it should be), but certainly is a relatively recent phenomenon."[175] He notes that if race has indeed lost much of the significance in the lives of non-whites, then a big-budget Hollywood film with a mixed star placed among a primarily white cast might be appropriate. However, Perlgut wonders if Hollywood is actually following a new trend, or instead backing away from films that deal with interracial relationships. His question is significant; the identities of mixed black actresses are

---

[172] Latoya Peterson, "Maya Rudolph Stars in Bridesmaids," *Racialicious,* April 20, 2011, accessed July 2, 2015.

[173] See Gabrielle Moss, "The 'Bridesmaids' Effect: How Did 'Bridesmaids' Change Hollywood," *Bitch Media*, Jun3 6, 2013, accessed January 18, 2017. "Bridesmaids was widely considered a watershed moment for women's comedy—going to a screening over opening weekend was presented as a social responsibility, and the film's success was considered proof that a raucous film about women's friendships could exceed everyone's financial expectations." Moss is one of the few reviewers who mentions race in the sense that comedy still lacks racial diversity and lead roles almost consistently go to white performers. See Roger Ebert, "Bridesmaids," *Rogerebert.com,* May 11, 2011, accessed January 18, 2017. Ebert writes that the film "definitively proves that women are the equal of men in vulgarity, sexual frankness, lust, vulnerability, overdrinking and insecurity. And it moves into areas not available to men." See also Manohla Dargis, "Deflating That Big, Puffy White Gown," *The New York Times,* May 12, 2011, accessed January 18, 2017. The writers of *Bridesmaids,* Wiig and Annie Mumolo, "offer irrefutable proof that . . . women can go aggressive laugh to aggressive-and-absurd laugh with men. All they need, beyond talent and timing, a decent director and better lines, is a chance."

[174] Don Perlgut, "Notes on the Film *Bridesmaids*," *Don Perlgut's Blog: Reflections on Movies, Books, Media, Culture and Politics,* June 12, 2011, accessed July 8, 2015.

[175] Ibid.

regularly covered or constructed as white when films do not want to focus on interracial relationships, and race and racial differences are often portrayed as insignificant. In the case of *Bridesmaids*, Hollywood has put forth a film starring a popular mixed actress alongside a white male lead, who lives in a white social world, without having to include commentary about black identity or racial issues.

However, the film could have coded Lillian as white but instead codes her as mixed-race, giving her more complexity and helping *Bridesmaids* move away from blatant racial covering.[176] Since Rudolph was known as black on *SNL* and part-black in early lead roles, Lillian's mixed-race identity is aligned with Rudolph's previous on-screen racial identities and portrayals of race. Detaching significance from Lillian's part-black background meant that race could have less impact on her romantic choices, and that it would be normal for her to not have had much exposure to potential friends or partners of color. However, race is often made insignificant because it is a touchy subject that, if highlighted, can change the tone of the film and its marketability.

Since Rudolph is an audience favorite, there is little risk in revealing her characters' non-white race. Yet minimizing the significance of her race helps place her in films with white casts that can appeal across audiences. In *Bridesmaids*, the film's choice to avoid aspects of Lillian and Dougie's relationship that might deal with racial issues mirrors the type of romantic films that Telecommunications Professor Andrew Weaver says white audiences are comfortable with: romantic films with white leading actors.[177] While members of racial minority groups are

[176] Films with a wedding at the center compel the inclusion of family members, thus the racial backgrounds of the characters getting married are usually known. To have Rudolph as the bride meant that her mixed race would have to be acknowledged, awkwardly obscured, or she would have to be an orphan like Zooey Rice.

[177] See Andrew T. Weaver, 381. Several news articles refer to Weaver's essay in discussing why African Americans are given fewer leading roles and why interracial relationships have continued to be taboo.

regularly exposed to actors of different races, white audiences have been fairly sheltered, as Amanda Sherker writes, due to Hollywood's long history of "white bias . . . deeply embedded in every facet of the industry."[178] Though society has moved toward further diversity and interracial interactions, "American cinema is not merely ignoring modern racial, ethnic and cultural realities – it is in complete denial."[179]

As one of two leads in *Bridesmaids*, Lillian's race is less of a factor than if she were the sole lead. Though the film revolves around her wedding, Annie's relationship is the main romance. Aside from Lillian, *Bridesmaids* is about white friends (and frenemies).[180] Having Annie at the center, and keeping Lillian's race a non-issue, makes the film marketable to audiences that understand films as catered to them when the lead roles are white.[181] *The Daily Reporter* relies on Weaver's findings to discuss why films with black cast members can fail to attract audiences across demographics: "white cinema-goers are convinced that films with black stars are not really made for them."[182] Weaver explains that white film audiences have had little exposure to non-white characters in roles that do not incorporate their race, and that they "perceive romantic films with minorities as 'not for them' because they seldom see minorities in race-neutral romantic roles."[183] From this perspective, Rudolph stands apart from other African

[178] Amanda Sherker, "Whitewashing Was One of Hollywood's Worst Habits. So Why is it Still Happening?" *The Huffington Post*, July 10, 2014, accessed July 13, 2015.

[179] Ibid.

[180] See "Frenemy," *Urban Dictionary*, January 3, 2005, accessed June 20, 2011. "Frenemy" is defined as "Someone who is both friend and enemy, a relationship that is both mutually beneficial or dependent while being competitive, fraught with risk and mistrust."

[181] Weaver, 383.

[182] Weaver, quoted in *Daily Mail Reporter*, "Why White Cinema Goers are Less Likely to Watch Movies with a Black Lead Actor."

[183] Weaver, 383.

American actresses; she is able to obtain top billing while not disrupting a film from being marketed broadly. She fits a race-neutral image that is often off limits to non-whites.[184]

As a lead character coded as mixed race, Lillian is an anomaly in large-budget Hollywood films with predominantly white casts. When in lead roles, the racial backgrounds of mixed race characters are often undisclosed. Sometimes their race is not discussed when they are part of a multiracial cast, or when their characters are written as racially neutral. Scripts are still rejected when characters cannot be made white, or when directors push for black leads.[185] Even highly talented black ensembles cannot always carry enough weight to gain studio backing.[186] Roland Martin explains that producers expect complications promoting a film in which several black actors have top billing: "For Hollywood, having one black guy in a film that has mostly whites is never called a white film. But if it's one or two white guys in a film with mostly blacks – uh oh, black film."[187] Thus, studio executives worry that such a film will be difficult to market. In *Bridesmaids*, the majority white cast keeps the film easily marketable.

The belief that black characters cause a film to be branded a "black" film, and consequently less saleable, may be why Lillian's wedding did not include supporting black characters, neither as friends nor as bridesmaids.[188] Rudolph broke racial barriers by capturing a lead role in a big-budget film with widespread appeal. She played a role that could have been

---

[184] See Rastogi. Law Professor Russell Robinson's research concluded that 69% of open film roles were presumed to be reserved for white actors, 22.5% for Caucasian specifically and "46.5 percent included no ethnic designation at all . . . implicitly understood by talent agents and actors to be Caucasian."

[185] Roland Martin, "Hollywood's Irrational Allergy to 'Black Films'," *CNN.com*, January 14, 2012, accessed July 13, 2015. Writer, director, and producer Dennis Cooper sold a script to studios without character descriptions. "When the studios found out the leads were black, they didn't want to make the movie anymore."

[186] Ibid. For instance, *The Hurricane Season*, "a basketball film about two teams coming together in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to win the Louisiana state championship. The movie went straight to DVD, angering lead actor Forest Whitaker, and others in the film, including Taraji Henson, Courtney B. Vance, Isaiah Washington and the rapper Bow Wow."

[187] Ibid.

[188] Additionally, and perhaps not coincidentally, neither have siblings.

cast differently. Though Rudolph achieved top billing, and was the main female in a wedding themed comedy, she appeared racially neutral, and was not a complex character. Including more black characters, especially if they shared significant screen time with Lillian could change the appearance of the narrative from romantic comedy (or comedy with emphasis on an impending wedding) into a film that dealt too deeply with race, or simply a "black film."[189] Thus, the film remained almost exclusively white despite featuring a part black lead.

Because the central focus of *Bridesmaids* is not Lillian and Dougie's interracial relationship, their brief screen time together means we do not get to know them as a couple.[190] Thus, the relationship is free of racial issues in part because it is underdeveloped. As Weaver's study uncovered, an interracial relationship in a film can spell trouble for its marketing potential to white audiences. Audience attendance, and in turn, money, can factor into Hollywood's reluctance to feature interracial relationships as positive or even three-dimensional. Ramoutar states, "it's an economic issue:" since the public continues to disapprove of these relationships, they are portrayed as problematic.[191] Weaver's research also revealed that many whites would shy away from films with black–white relationships due to an assumption that the storyline would focus on the "trials and tribulations of having an interracial relationship."[192] Would *Bridesmaids* have lost marketing or distribution potential if the couple was featured more, or if Lillian expressed her black ancestry? Both would add complexity to the characters and the narrative, but underlying cultural bias continues to shape the kinds of relationships and outcomes depicted on-screen.

---

[189] *Daily Mail Reporter*, "Why White Cinema Goers are Less Likely to Watch Movies with a Black Lead Actor."

[190] Ibid. Ramoutar states that interracial relationships are "still used as a conflict device within the story."

[191] KC Ifeanyi, "The Last Taboo: Will Smith, 'Focus,' and Hollywood's Interracial Couples Problem," *Fast Company*, March 2, 2015, accessed July 16, 2015.

[192] Weaver, 381.

Weaver is optimistic about white audiences' willingness to watch interracial pairings if the story is one that they can easily identify with.[193] Audience members might not see themselves in characters like Lillian, but comedies, likeable big-name stars, and weddings are all popular with American viewers. Further, *Bridesmaids* was marketed as a friendship comedy. Images and promo ads for the films consisted of the *Bridesmaids* ensemble. In print advertisements, the mixed female lead was never shown exclusively with the white romantic interest.[194]

Bridesmaids made strides for white women in Hollywood comedies, but its lack of racial diversity and attention to race meant that even as a lead character, Lillian's identity was not fully articulated. Lillian's racial background, family connections, and romantic relationship were only briefly raised. On the other hand, Annie's white racial and cultural background were articulated through her white mother and friends and her community, who all shared similar identities. Annie undergoes a range of emotions and is a complex character, whereas Lillian's lack of depth meant that she was primarily significant for what she provided Annie. Further, her romantic relationship was of little importance other than being the impetus for the wedding preparations. Thus, while Rudolph was cast as a mixed black lead in a Hollywood rom-com, her role neutralized much of her black and mixed identity.

When Rudolph plays a central role, her race, if not explicitly defined, can often be understood contextually through her love interests. *Friends with Kids* (2011) and *Up All Night* (2011–2012) do not discuss Rudolph's characters' race, but identifying markers code them as racially neutral or white in the former and black or mixed in the latter.[195] Also similar to her

---

[193] Ifeanyi.

[194] See marketing analyst Chris Thilk, "Movie Marketing Madness: Bridesmaids," *Christhilk.com*, May 11, 2011, accessed January 13, 2017.

[195] In *Friends*, since Rudolph does not have a lead role, and the film has an ensemble cast, there is much less to analyze in comparison to *Away We Go* and *Bridesmaids*.

success in *Bridesmaids*, Rudolph shined in these roles due to her characters adding humor and being able to fit in with a primarily white cast.

Friends with Kids is a dramatic comedy about a close group of thirty-something-year-old friends and what happens to their marriages and friendships when they have kids. Of the tight-knit group, two couples struggle with the trials of parenthood, while two individuals remain single and childfree. Both the comedic and dramatic aspects of the film come from the remaining two individuals deciding to have a child together, but staying single in an effort to not compromise their lives as their friends have done. As the two time-share their baby while pursuing romantic prospects, they realize they might be in love with each other. The result is an unconventional look at love, relationships, and parenting.

The film was praised for its originality and criticized for reinforcing traditional Hollywood rom-com endings. *Friends with Kids* was directed by Jennifer Westfeldt and stars the director as Julie Keller (one of the single individuals), and Adam Scott as Jason Fryman (the other single individual), with secondary roles filled by Rudolph and some of her *SNL* and *Bridesmaids* co-stars. Rudolph and Chris O'Dowd play Leslie and Alex, and Kristen Wiig and John Hamm play Missy and Ben. Rudolph was praised for adding to the film as a "great comic gem" and as a contributor of "some of the biggest laughs in the movie."[196] Notably, Leslie and Alex are the only characters who appear in scenes without Julie or Jason.

In *Friends*, Rudolph is the lone actor of color in an otherwise all-white cast, but Leslie is not made out to be racially distinct,[197] and so, since race is sidelined, viewers may understand

[196] Gregory Ellwood, "Review: Adam Scott and Maya Rudolph Shine in Very Funny 'Friends with Kids'," *Hitflix*, September 10, 2011, accessed June 10, 2015.

[197] The only distinction in Alex and Leslie's relationship that sets them apart from the other couples is that Leslie is several years older than Alex. Westfeldt specifically addressed the age difference, yet Leslie's racial background was not touched upon.

Leslie as racially neutral or white. Robert Nowatzki writes that "Whiteness" can be "constituted by performing what others consider to be 'white.'"[198] Here, Leslie's lifestyle is similar to that of her friends, and nothing in the film marks her as non-white. Leslie is Julie's confidant. The majority of her conversations with Julie or Alex discuss the difficulties of parenting. Leslie also appears at get-togethers with the whole group of friends and their kids. Because of Leslie's limited screen time, the audience does not fully know her. A non-white partner or mixed kids could code Leslie as non-white, contextually identifying her, and giving depth to her character. However, Rudolph's comedic contributions, and seeing her alongside *SNL* peers, invites the audience to accept her as they did on *SNL*: as a cross-racial performer primarily defined by her humor.

With the release of *Friends,* and less than half a year after the success of *Bridesmaids*, Rudolph became the third billed performer in the NBC comedy *Up All Night.* Rudolph's character, Ava, was written after the show was fully conceived. Jesse David Fox writes, "Ava was originally a distant third lead," compared to Christina Applegate and Will Arnett, playing Reagan and Chris Brinkley, who are new parents adjusting to changes in their work and home life, "but after the success of *Bridesmaids*, Maya Rudolph's role beefed up."[199] Dave Itzkoff agrees that her role was "transformed and expanded . . . to play better to Ms. Rudolph's strengths."[200] Thus, Rudolph was given a larger role on a show with a primarily white cast and no pressing need to incorporate actors of color, and—as with most of her featured roles—she

[198] Robert Nowatzki, "'Blackin Up is Doin' White Folks Doin' Us': Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Performance in Contemporary American Fiction and Film," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 18, no. 2 (2007): 115–136.

[199] Jesse David Fox, "'Up All Night' Appears to Be Canceling The Ava Show," *Splitsider,* August 1, 2012, accessed May 15, 2015.

[200] Dave Itzkoff, "Juggling a Comedy Series about Juggling Life's Tasks," *The New York Times,* September 9, 2011, accessed June 22, 2015.

was very successful; in 2012, Rudolph was nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series.

Ava Alexander is the host of her own daytime talk show (produced by Reagan), and Reagan's long-time friend. Initially, Ava's race was not specified, but her career and a look into her past code her as part-black or mixed-race. By behaving similarly to the famous African American celebrity—whom Rudolph herself imitated for years on *SNL*—and because Ava has her own show, she is understood as a caricature of Oprah Winfrey. Despite Rudolph repeatedly assuring interviewers and fans that Ava was a completely different character, many continued to compare her to both Oprahs.[201]

In Season One, Episode Three, "Working Late and Working It," it is revealed that, ten years ago, Ava had a music career similar to 1990s pop and R&B duos. Ava is then coded as mixed and African American in a music video "Basically," in which she starred with her former fiancé "B-Ro," (mixed actor Jorma Taccone). Ava and Reagan watch "Basically" on an online streaming website. In the video, Ava's hair, clothes, style, and the song lyrics, construct her as mixed race and part African American.

Instead ignoring race and neutralizing of Ava's non-white background, as occurred with Rudolph's characters in *Bridesmaids* and *Friends with Kids*, Ava's performance in "Basically" attaches race to her character and depicts the ease with which mixed actors can cross-racially perform. Ava and B-Ro sing about their relationship, shedding light on their identities while engaging in awkward and cheesy cross-cultural and cross-racial performances. In the brief video, Ava and B-Ro go through several costume changes, each one relating to a particular era or culture. The couple is shown first wearing a kimono and gi respectively, then bowing to each

[201] Christopher Borrelli, "Ava. Oprah. Oprah. Ava," *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 2011, accessed June 22, 2015.

other behind a screen. Then Ava is dressed as a flapper from the 1920s, complete with a long beaded red dress, a cream-colored boa, pearls, red gloves, and a headband with feathers; B-Ro is her photographer in an oversized suit. Finally, both wear 1990s clothing and hairstyles, a low ponytail, baggy jeans, and loose fitting shirt on him, and big curly hair, huge hoop earrings, and an off-the-shoulder flower-print top on her. The music mimics catchy and smooth R&B from the 1990s in which they awkwardly proclaim their feelings and include suggestive comments about their sexual encounters that often need to be censored.[202]

While television has been criticized for regularly choosing to "ignore or obsess" over any divergence from the norm, particularly racial difference, Ava's race is alluded to (via her profession as a daytime talk show host resembling Oprah and her backstory as an R&B singer), but does not completely define her.[203] Though Ava lacks friends and love interests (with the exception of Taccone) who are mixed or non-white, her racial identity is in line with Rudolph's views on race, as well as some of her past portrayals. Her race is articulated, and there is humor and complexity regarding mixed race in "Basically." The video provides commentary on racial ambiguity and multiplicity while poking fun at mixed race and exploring cross-racial performance. One line of the song that contains obvious racial meaning pertaining to Ava and B-Ro, and also to Rudolph and Taccone is, "Ostensibly speaking, if you were to focus on this relationship, it would test well in every demographic."[204] The ambiguity and mixed backgrounds

[202] R&B or Rhythm and Blues is a genre of music that known for being made by and primarily performed by African American singers.

[203] James Poniewozik, "Up All Night, Modern Family and TV's Feminism for Men," *Time*, November 17, 2011, accessed June 22, 2015.

[204] *Up All Night*. The extended version of the video includes this line.

of both actors are showcased in a hilarious way that shows that the writers are aware Rudolph and Taccone differ from the rest of the cast.[205]

The music video gives Ava a racial identity in that it relies on media stereotypes of black women and African Americans in hip-hop. Language in particular helps to construct Ava's race; the lyrics to her song are understood as "black" due to the way the language they use is sensationalized in the media and in rap and hip-hop music. Referencing playa rap that glorifies consumption, Ava mentions her "beautiful mantz in Bel Air which I purchased from Jazz and Soul legend Peabo Bryson."[206] While watching "Basically," Reagan clicks on the link of a streaming video clip entitled "Classic Ava/B-Ro Meltdown," bringing up the image of Ava, clad in a short, tight, brightly colored dress, black stockings, pink high heels, a puffy cropped burgundy jacket, and teased hair, hitting B-Ro repeatedly with her purse, yelling, "Where my money at, bitch?"[207] Her clothes, hair, language, and tone conjure the stereotypical image of an angry black woman unfazed by causing a scene. Reagan's video viewing also reveals that Ava and B-Ro's romance was tumultuous; he embezzled her life savings and cheated on her, to which Ava retaliated by "torching his tour bus while screaming, 'is your ho in there? I smell burnt ho.'"[208]

In their present-day meeting over drinks, Ava and B-Ro's brief conversation quickly moves from amicable to hysterical, revealing their latent tempers. At first, the two appear more mature than in the past, but when B-Ro makes a comment about Ava being uptight, the scene immediately changes to them fighting outside of the restaurant, during which Ava calls him a

[205] Rudolph is fairly identifiable as racially mixed. With fairer skin and medium brown hair, Taccone, aside from his name, may not be readily understood as non-white or mixed.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Ibid. Reagan is shown in the video with teased hair, wearing a tight red dress with a black belt and black leather jacket. B-Ro wears a baggy multi-color dress shirt and pants. Both are styles that were common in the '90s.

[208] Ibid.

"fool" and a "bitch."[209] She hits him with her purse, and he appears disheveled and shirtless, yelling profanities in front of a growing crowd. This altercation results in a viral video, "Ava and B-Ro At It Again!!!" that generates over one million hits within hours.[210] Ava is hot-tempered; she switches from dignified to raucous in a matter of seconds. This scene, juxtaposed with her previous fight with B-Ro, reveals that underneath their polished clothing and demeanors, they both still have elements of their past personas.

Up All Night's humorous take on cross-racial performances and constructions of black identity was a considerable step toward including Ava's race. There is no "hysterical silence" or covering of Ava's background as there was with Leslie in *Friends with Kids* and, to some extent, with Lillian in *Bridesmaids*. Since Rudolph is known as black and mixed, Ava's being of mixed race may have been expected, and the "Basically" video was added confirmation. On the other hand, Rudolph is regularly understood as a comedian whose background can be separated from her character's identity, and she was concurrently playing other characters not defined by black cultural identity.

Hollywood has few mixed and black celebrities with racial versatility like Rudolph who can cross categories with ease. Not looking solely black or solely white means Rudolph can be cast as either or both. Whether roles emphasize or erase her black identity, her characters are successful and do not throw off audiences, meaning that she is able to seamlessly fit into different racial backgrounds. This ability illustrates the way race can shift forms and become more or less noticeable depending on context, cast, costuming, behavior, and language. Unlike most non-white celebrities, and despite being known as mixed-race and part-black, Rudolph is not restricted to playing characters who must be racially defined and therefore can play virtually

[209] Ibid.

[210] Ibid.

anyone and fit into any cast. Her roles do not have to deal with race at all, they can include facets of racial identity but not discuss racial issues, or they can be mixed or part-black while her similarities to white standards of beauty—and her familiarity with white audiences—keep her from making race a central theme.

Any Race or No Race – Rudolph's Continuing Widespread Appeal

Rudolph ranks among the most successful African American celebrities—those who have achieved mass appeal. Due to their popularity across audiences, stars such as Will Smith and Denzel Washington are in a special category of black performers. Martin writes that because they do not face the same limitations as the majority of African American actors, in many ways they "aren't really seen as black . . . they have crossed the post-racial threshold and in Hollywood's eyes, white America will watch them."[211] Kara Keeling argues that Smith and Washington's unique success comes from the types of roles they play. Keeling writes, "they're playing roles that don't require any sort of racial consciousness."[212] Thus, they can star in a film without race being a central theme. The two have inimitable film careers because their characters are not attached to any particular racial identity; an actor of any race could have been cast and the film would remain the same.[213]

Audience appreciation for Rudolph mirrors Weaver's analysis of Smith's popularity. Weaver writes that Smith "is popular for the same reasons that any actor or actress is popular: He's good-looking, he's charismatic, he's a solid actor. . . . It's not about being a crossover star,

[211] Martin.

[212] Kara Keeling, quoted in Michael Ventre, "Black Stars Don't Mean Hollywood is Color-blind," *Today*, February 4, 2010, accessed January 18, 2017.

[213] Ibid. Keeling asserts, "Washington and Smith play roles that could conceivably have been played by stars such as Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Bruce Willis, Johnny Depp or any numbers of others."

it's about being a star."[214] The diversity of characters that Smith, and to some extent, Rudolph, play have added to their widespread appeal. By not being confined to stereotypical roles for African Americans, they are more relatable to non-black moviegoers. Despite their fame, Rudolph and Smith can still have difficulty being cast alongside non-black partners when romance is a significant part of the plot, and also in films with elements of the romantic comedy; however, both have been cast in interracial romances that have a positive outcome, and do not reconstruct the film as a story centered on racial issues—thus breaking the mold for mixed actors and romantic comedies that feature black actors.

Smith's and Rudolph's accomplishments exceed most performers, yet their romantic pairings remain fraught. Despite being a highly sought after and marketable lead actor, Smith has been shown in few romantic lead roles with a black female lead.[215] Ifeanyi writes, "Over the course of his career, Smith's leading ladies have inched closer to the Caucasian end of the race spectrum."[216] In the 2005 romantic comedy *Hitch*, Smith was partnered with Cuban American actress Eva Mendes in an effort to remain palatable to audiences that might react negatively to a black-white interracial pairing or would be turned off by a black lead couple.[217] According to Walls, Smith was aware that his romantic partner had to be strategic. Casting directors would not support a black lead female, because they "feared that a black couple would have put off

---

[214] Ifeanyi.

[215] In *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Chris Gardner's marriage to Linda (played by Newton) was filled with anger and resentment; the film was neither a romance nor a romantic comedy. Since it was based on a true story, it made sense to cast African American actors. Smith has been paired with black or mixed actresses in many of his sci-fi, thriller, and action films, yet often these relationships occur in minor flashbacks, or the actresses have very minor roles and the romantic relationship is not a focal point of the film. For example, *Bad Boys* (1995), *Independence Day* (1996), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *I Am Legend* (2007), *Seven Pounds* (2008), *After Earth* (2013), and with mixed race Rosario Dawson in *Men in Black II* (2002) and *Seven Pounds*. Dawson is often coded as black or mixed black, but she is Afro-Cuban, Puerto Rican, Native American, and Irish according to *Biography.com*.

[216] Ifeanyi.

[217] Jeannette Walls, "Was Race an Issue in 'Hitch' Casting?" *Today Entertainment*, February 24, 2005, accessed August 3, 2015.

worldwide audiences whereas a white/African American combo would have offended viewers in the U.S."[218] Thus, Hollywood worried that *Hitch*'s marketability and widespread appeal could be impeded despite Smith's popularity.[219] Studios were not willing to spend $50 million dollars on a romantic comedy featuring a black couple when it could fail in the U.S.[220] However, a Latin American actress was the solution. According to Walls, Eva Mendes was cast in the role "because apparently, the black/Latina combination is not considered taboo."[221]

The uncertainty for a film's success when the lead couple is not deemed appealing to both domestic and international audiences is what has likely kept Rudolph alongside white actors when given a starring role. Perhaps as her stardom increases, there will be more racial diversity with her lead male counterparts. Presently, Rudolph continues to have widespread appeal due to her talent as a comic writer and performer, believability in racially neutral roles, and self-identification that is in line with the post-race attitudes welcomed from racial minorities. As a comedian and impersonator, Rudolph will no doubt play some African American characters as well as a multitude of racial combinations. Furthermore, as a writer and collaborator with highly successful (white) comedians and actresses Kristen Wiig, Tina Fey, and Amy Poehler, Rudolph will have access to many more Hollywood roles. For instance, in December 2015, the film *Sisters* premiered. There, Rudolph had third billing after Fey and Poehler, and she was the only performer of African American ancestry among the cast. Though this proves her versatility and

[218] Ibid. See also USC's Lisa Aldridge quoted in Michael Ventre, "Black Stars Don't Mean Hollywood is Color-Blind," *Today*, February 4, 2010, accessed January 18, 2017. "Because of Hollywood's very intimate relationship with international distributors . . . if the belief exists that black films don't do well in foreign, then there is not incentive to increase black faces in television and film."

[219] See Walls. See also Ifeanyi. Recently, Smith starred in the crime drama *Focus* (2015) with white lead actress Margot Robbie. Since the couple both had starring roles *and* a romantic relationship, Smith was deemed to have pulled off a successful interracial romance in a big budget, mainstream film.

[220] Ifeanyi.

[221] Walls.

allure, it also reiterates the fact that Hollywood will make opportunities for racially mixed actors, but only when these actors can fit into primarily white casts and can play characters detached from race. This is conceivably what Rudolph wants: to be proud of her mixed race, but not to have it define her or her roles.

CONCLUSION

Mixed-race Performers and the Burdens of Any Racial Identity

Actresses Jones, Newton, and Rudolph and their bodies of work, alongside President Barack Obama in his role as a symbol of the nation, contribute to the complex and constantly changing ways we simultaneously celebrate and burden mixed race people. Many portrayals of mixed-race characters by mixed-race performers at the turn of the twenty-first century remain partially formed, lack a full range of emotions, and are often detached from race. Many mixed-race characters continue to be constructed based on antiquated stereotypes. Some are coded with signifiers of white or black identity, yet their racial backgrounds are unstated or irrelevant. When mixed characters appear to seamlessly fit into a white social world, it is because their race, ethnicity, and culture are made incidental. This privileges a raceless or white identity rather than significant parts of their background.

The on-screen success of mixed-race performers can make black identity more inclusive and visible while also limiting opportunities for single-race black performers. As the first decade-and-a-half of the twenty-first century revealed, Hollywood, casting directors, audiences, fans, and film critics can celebrate a performer's racially mixed background, yet their whole identity, especially their black ancestry, may never be reflected on screen, even when they are cast as mixed-race characters. While white performers can be cast as white characters and often without having to obscure parts of their white identity, the same is not true for non-whites and actors of mixed race. Unlike performers in the dominant racial group, non-white and mixed-race performers' backgrounds are deemed problematic and in need of covering, insignificant, or undesirable in ways that could impact potential film revenue. In this way, they are positioned as

inferior to white performers. On-screen, denial of culture and ethnic background robs a character of a complex identity and often means they exist without family or history. This leads to relatively flat non-white and mixed characters that appear inferior to white characters who have a more nuanced history and full range of emotions.

Presently, many roles played by mixed actresses deviate from the formulaic tragic mulatta typecasts of early Hollywood; however, discomfort with racial difference still informs the construction of racially mixed characters and what type of romantic relationship they can have. Jones in particular played characters whose racial ambiguity made them intriguing, yet disturbing. The "hysterical silence" over racial difference and mixed race that continues to occur in Hollywood is a symptom of the allure of racial mixture tempered by the unease it causes.[1] Jones' characters in turn of the twenty-first-century television comedies such as Karen Scarfolli on *Freaks and Geeks* and Karen Filipelli on *The Office* are used to poke fun at white discomfort over acknowledging racial difference, yet the two shows end up reinforcing tropes of mixed race as deviant. The two Karens are outcasts by virtue of their presumed racial difference, which caused them to be desirable to white male characters, a threat to white female characters, and eventually left without friends or romance. In *Crash*, the mixed race and physicality of Newton's character, Christine Thayer, aroused and disgusted a white police officer and led to her sexual abuse. Finally, in *Away We Go*, although Rudolph's character Verona is not precluded from being fully formed and having a loving and long-lasting relationship due to her part-black identity, that identity leads to awkward and inappropriate questions that point to whites' difficulties discussing racial difference.

[1] See Nuckols, "Hysterical Silence."

These characters—the Karens, Christine, and Verona—all illustrate whites' persistent unease with those who do not conform to recognizable racial categories. Though there is a significant range in how they are received, each character is burdened by race, distance from whiteness, and the enduring silence regarding interracial romance and sex that prevents further development of the character. Notably, these roles were performed by Jones, Newton, and Rudolph in the initial stages of their Hollywood careers, when they played black and part-black characters more frequently.

Prior to the end of the twentieth century, part-black actors in Hollywood were often considered solely black and cast accordingly despite being part-white and even identifying as such. Not only was there a lack of language to discuss various forms of racial mixture, but mixed people themselves were less visible and, consequently, less known. In "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed race Identities," Gregory T. Carter attributes being known as mixed-race to helping part-black actors gain work and popularity.[2] Today's fascination with stars such as Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson, who have mass appeal across racial demographics, results from their known (or in the case of Diesel, presumed) mixed backgrounds and the characters they play.[3] Instead of only being cast in roles where lighter skin does not detract from being understood as authentically black, being identified as mixed helped both actors gain roles and familiarity with audiences. Carter contrasts Diesel and Johnson with 1970s Blaxploitation actor, Ron O'Neal, who had difficulty being cast as black because his skin was light at a time when being mixed was not yet an option or desirable trait. In that era, the diversity of black identities was much less familiar to audiences, as few black actors worked

[2] Gregory T. Carter, "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed Race Identities," in *Mixed Race Hollywood*, eds. Mary Beltran and Camilla Fojas (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 203–220.

[3] Carter, 204.

outside of Blaxploitation films. Therefore, identifying a performer as black was heavily dependent on skin color and that color being the opposite of white.

From media to film to political organizations, the 1990s through the present have seen a shift in the diversity of racial mixtures, physical appearances, and skin tones comprising black identity. Ensemble films such as *For Colored Girls* have featured actresses with light to dark skin, some of whom were mixed, but all of whom were understood as black. Maya Rudolph has taken many liberties representing blackness in her numerous celebrity impersonations and self-created characters. Despite asserting her mixed identity, Rudolph not only succeeded in demonstrating that part-black ancestry can be considered black on screen, she is repeatedly nominated for awards recognizing exceptional performances by black women in comedy, television, and film.

The inclusion of mixed black within a larger black identity means that mixed-race actresses can represent black ancestry while playing unquestionably mixed characters. In September 2014, *Black-ish*[4] debuted as a reinvention of the black family sitcom that was popular in the 1980s and 1990s but had disappeared from television by the twenty-first century.[5] The scant number of black-themed television shows and shows featuring black families on prime time meant starring roles in sitcoms were an anomaly for black actresses. *Black-ish* features the Johnson family of six. The leading roles are played by Anthony Anderson as Andre Johnson ("Dre") and Tracee Elliss Ross as Dr. Rainbow Johnson ("Bow"). Due to the present day racially fraught era in which the show takes place, Dre and Bow engage in humorous banter tinged with

[4] Kenya Barris, creator, *Black-ish*, ABC, KGO-TV, Season 1, 2014–2015, Television.

[5] Courtney Garcia, "What Happened to Black Family Sitcoms on Network TV?" *theGrio*, September 30, 2013, accessed August 21, 2015. In the 1980s and 1990s, "television networks featured a variety of dynamic, funny and emblematic African-American families . . . the Huxtables, Coopers, Wayans, and Winslows, Martin and Moesha . . . entered living rooms around the country and demonstrated the prolific and multifarious character of American blackness."

social and political commentary on race relations, being whitened by class privilege, white collar employment, and life in the suburbs.

Bow's racially mixed background is revealed early in the show and is often a starting point for questioning her authenticity as black and reiterating that mixed does not mean "less black." In an interview with *EURnews*, Ross remarked that discussions of what is black and what is mixed race are "universal conversations" and *Black-ish* is presenting its point of view through Bow's character.[6] Bow's mixed race is revealed, is left open for critique, and expands the classification of black by depicting a more nuanced and complex version of who is considered black. Positioning Bow within varying degrees of black identity reiterates Yaba Blay's definition that "Black" means being "connected to people of African descent all over the world."[7] Black includes "lived, racialized and politicized identities, not colors found in a box of crayons."[8] As a mixed black and white physician with a house in the suburbs, Bow's deviation from the more common urban experience and socioeconomic social class caused some critics to deem her experience inauthentic or straying too far from a familiar understanding of black family life.[9] However, Bow's dual mixed *and* black identity is innovative for television. Unlike Jones, Newton, and Rudolph, she is able to play a dynamic and complex character of her own racial background—in essence, she gets to play herself, a rarity for mixed race performers. Reflecting on her acting career, Ross—the half black, half white daughter of music legend Diana Ross—says that she "never played a mixed person on TV," but that after *Black-ish*, "I'm actually out as

[6] EURnews, "Tracee Ellis Ross on *Black-ish* Theme of 'What is Black'," *Soundcloud*, 2014, accessed June 23, 2017.

[7] Yaba Blay, "Totally Biased with W.Kamau Bell," *YouTube*, November 13, 2013, accessed August 11, 2015.

[8] Kennedy Allen, "Being Black: It's Not the Skin Color," *Philadelphia Weekly*, November 12, 2013, accessed August 11, 2015.

[9] See Michelle May-Curry, "Dr. Rainbow Johnson: Tracee Ellis Ross and Mixed Race on *Black-ish*," *Kaleido[scopes]: Diaspora Re-Imagined*, August 21, 2015, accessed August 21, 2015. She disagrees that Bow has

a mixed woman."[10] As mixed-race women, Ross and Bow insert diverging narratives into the present-day black experience and reiterate that living in the world as black makes one legitimately black despite also being part white.

Despite the slowly growing number of opportunities for racially mixed actresses to play mixed-race or black characters in significant or lead roles, ambiguous or race-neutral characters are often more popular, and mixed performers who are cast in those roles are often racially unmarked in order to fit a white norm. Jones and Rudolph have played lead female roles in Blockbuster films, yet the storylines of those films and the marketing for them catered to white audiences. The two actresses have regularly been cast as the only non-white character amidst white social circles, who fit in because their character's lifestyle mirrors those of their white friends. Such was the case for Jones in *I Love You, Man*, *Celeste and Jesse Forever*, and *The Office*, and, to some extent, on *Parks and Recreation*. For Rudolph, this occurred in *Bridesmaids*, *Friends with Kids,* and *Up All Night*.

Jones co-wrote the script for *Celeste and Jesse Forever*, starred in it, and brought to it her own post-racial conviction of not needing to label or discuss race. In fact, *Celeste and Jesse Forever* loosely mirrored one of her own romances. In an interview with Melena Ryzik, Jones elaborated on how her own life experiences are intertwined with Celeste's: "I was for sure exorcising some demons. I was in a lot of pain when I wrote this movie — life stuff."[11] Given Jones' close connection to her character and the plot, the absence of racial issues could reflect their lack of significance in Jones' own dating life and social world. Further, Jones' familiar

---

an authentic black identity: "The things that tie her to blackness are not her identity or her life experiences but her physical features, and her inability to cook authentically black food."

[10] EURnews.

[11] Melena Ryzik, "Breaking the Mold By Writing a Part for Herself," *The New York Times,* August 1, 2012, accessed August 24, 2015.

presence on screen playing racially ambiguous and racially unmarked characters is mirrored in the film: Celeste is detached from race and only has white friends and romantic partners.

Jones' characters Celeste, Zooey Rice, Karen Filipelli, and Ann Perkins all have social and professional lives that involve primarily white friends and coworkers and are rooted in the middle class. While Celeste and Zooey live in Los Angeles, where there is no shortage of racial diversity, Karen Filipelli and Ann Perkins live and work in small towns that are predominantly white and where their racial difference is more significant. However, no matter where they live, whether they lack a racial background or take on an ambiguous and mixed (but not black) identity, Jones' characters have the class status and lifestyle that matches their white friends and colleagues. Through context these characters are understood as either white or not tied to a specific race in effect denying their ethnic and cultural identity.

In *Bridesmaids, Friends with Kids*, and *Up All Night*, Rudolph's characters' race is erased through the silence surrounding racial issues and racial difference. *Bridesmaids* and *Up All Night* (written by Rudolph's friends and *SNL* cast-mates) imply Lillian and Ava's racially mixed backgrounds despite their only having white friends. *Friends with Kids* constructs Leslie without a racial identity and places her in a solely white social world. These characters are all part of the middle to upper middle class, and similar to Jones' characters, they do not deviate from the class advantages of their friends and professional associates. By emulating white lifestyles and maintaining strong, long-lasting bonds with white childhood and college friends, Lillian, Ava, and Leslie have similar life experiences with their friends despite racial differences. Though Lillian's and Ava's mixed backgrounds are briefly touched on, they are not meaningful enough to affect any part of their daily lives.

Despite casting racially mixed actresses in lead and featured roles, many Hollywood films ignore race; this diminishes the differences between characters and the need to discuss anything race-related. Making race and mixed race only incidental to a character's life, may seem like a post-racial construction of the film, but it also denies any black or non-white identity. Likeable, revenue-generating celebrities such as Rudolph and Jones add some diversity to a cast, but when their characters are constructed as race-neutral or detached from race, their inclusion ends up revealing limits on racial progressiveness and exposes racial hierarchies.

Performing mixed race can mean becoming trapped in antiquated tropes of mixed race or playing only racially ambiguous characters; few actors are able to consistently play fully formed mixed characters or seamlessly move back and forth along the racial spectrum throughout their careers. Maya Rudolph exemplifies a malleable form of mixed race that is rarely seen in Hollywood; she can choose to take on any racial identity or none at all. This level of fluidity is uncommon, but it is an ideal embodiment of a mixed-race performer. Her years on *SNL* showcased not only her talent at successfully pulling off numerous cross-racial performances, but also the ease with which audiences believed them. Rudolph is able to do this to some extent in film, as well; the majority of critics and audiences simply accept her characters despite their differing races, even if they conflict with other characters she is simultaneously playing. In *Transcending Blackness*, Joseph writes that mixed race as an identity can be "used by those with racially mixed backgrounds rather than have their diverging ancestries rule over" them.[12] Mixed ancestry does not have to be a burden; as Rudolph proves, racially mixed backgrounds can sometimes be publicly embraced without social repercussions.

[12] Joseph, 165.

Regularly asserting a part-black identity can make it difficult for mixed-race performers to later be acknowledged as any race other than black, yet Rudolph, unlike many others, has not been pigeonholed into one racial category. Rudolph's "use" of her mixed background is analogous to Joseph's commentary on President Obama's "use" of his mixed ancestry to forge commonalities with multiple communities despite his divergent background.[13] The two are able to circumstantially identify and be identified with different ethnic, racial, and even (in the case of Obama) cultural groups; maintain ties to black ancestry; and venture beyond the usual all-encompassing nature of blackness while not alienating white supporters or fans. Their mixed race empowers them in a way that is not usually attainable for those who are part black.

Choosing to publicly identify as racially mixed can mean acknowledging a part-black identity that rejects racial erasure and claims membership in both black and white racial groups. This can contradict a racially ambiguous image, but acknowledges those who look to "out" mixed-race celebrities for representation. Unspecified racial mixture and ambiguity have stood for progress and post-race and have been celebrated in ways that being part black has not. In Hollywood, known black ancestry can define celebrities in a way that makes it more difficult for them to later assert a neutral or racially unspecified identity or to play an ambiguous character. For instance, to project a turn-of-the-twenty-first-century post-race image, the director of *MI:2* minimized Nyah Nordoff-Hall's racial difference by omitting any discussion of her background. Nyah's race was erased and, in playing her, Newton did not embodying a mixed-race character.

Having black ancestry and being mixed-race caused varying levels of degradation for Tangie in *For Colored Girls*, Christine Thayer in *Crash*, Rita in *Idiocracy*, and Zooey Rice in *I Love You, Man*. Perry's character Tangie epitomized a modern version of the literary tragic

[13] Ibid.

mulatta figure born out of rape, socially isolated, and internally conflicted. She is tantalizing to men but punished by being unable to forge connections with women. Though worlds apart in terms of financial status and privilege, Christine Thayer in *Crash* does not fare much better than Tangie; her racial mixture and the way her race can be obscured and understood as almost white contributes to her sexual assault. Race limits Christine, as Haggis bars her from achieving personal satisfaction or safety in a society where those privileges are not extended to black women. She is also distanced from her husband due to their conflicting views over how to engage with their black identity. Unlike Christine, Rita, in *Idiocracy*, does not voice her racial identity, yet she is contextually coded as black. Her lack of aptitude is evidenced by her speech, job, criminal record, black boyfriend/pimp, and her participation in an experiment that necessitates no higher than average intelligence. These pervasive racial stereotypes reinforce Rita's racial background. With little self-reflection, blunt statements, and brief screen time, Rita is not shown engaging with her racial identity. Finally, in *I Love You, Man*, the film must cover Zooey's ancestry in order to avoid racial issues. Zooey escapes the violence directed at Tangie and Christine and the criminality that surrounds Rita because she has a raceless identity meant to resemble whiteness. Zooey cannot self-identify, or race would be brought into the film. Ultimately, Zooey's racial erasure mirrors Jones' when she wins unmarked roles that are not available to black actresses who cannot be constructed as detached from race.

Black Over Mixed Race and The "New Black" & Dreams of A Post-Race America

Prior to the multiracial millennium, there were few identity choices for racially mixed individuals. Lighter skin did not necessarily prevent many mixed-race film stars from being understood as black, though in some instances lack of pigmentation meant fewer African

American roles were available. For instance, renowned writer and performer Anna Deavere Smith was deemed "not black enough for African-American roles" because her lighter skin gave her an ambiguous appearance.[14] Some were cast in roles that left their race unmentioned and thus were not necessarily known for being black actors. Others played only unquestionably black characters, yet they shocked and disappointed fans by distancing themselves from a black identity or disavowing membership in the African American community.

Though the twenty-first century now allows for greater movement back and forth along the racial spectrum, some mixed black celebrities choose to assert a black identity despite the option of being known as multiracial. Tracee Ellis Ross defines herself as a black woman despite her white ancestry and the privileges that could come with identifying as multiracial. She recently declared, "I am both and yet I identify as a black woman."[15] Using her renowned African American mother's surname also aligns Ross with her black ancestry. Meanwhile, in the documentary, *Chasing Daybreak*, former Senator Barack Obama cautioned mixed-race youth against privileging a mixed over a single minority racial identity. He stressed that identifying as racially mixed should not lead to being "detached from larger struggles" for racial minorities.[16] While mixed-race activists pushed for the inclusion of mixed-race stories in the narratives about race in America, celebrities like Obama and Ross refuse to privilege their mixed backgrounds over their black ancestry despite many mixed-race supporters and fans hoping for that kind of validation.

Some African American performers have successfully branded themselves as multiracial rather than black; however, this racial transcendence rejects racial identity in a way that matches

[14] Janice Albert, "Anna Deavere Smith," *California Association of Teachers of English*, n.d., accessed December 9, 2015.

[15] EURnews.

[16] Louie Gong, Interview with Barack Obama, *Chasing Daybreak: A Film about Mixed Race in America*, 2005, February 24, 2014, accessed September 3, 2015.

post-racial ideology but not most African Americans' lived realities in the twenty-first century. From childhood, actress Raven-Symoné played African American characters in seminal black television shows; her acting success was due to recognition of her race and a strong black fan base in an otherwise oppressive industry.[17] However, Symoné rejects racial identifications.[18] Though acknowledged as a positive representation for African Americans, Symoné now wants to escape being identified by race and espouses colorblind ideology.

Symoné has positioned herself in a post-racial manner as detached from and unaffected by race. In the highly publicized 2014 interview with Oprah Winfrey, "Where Are They Now?" Symoné declared, "I'm not African American — I'm American," and proceeded to shock Winfrey and launch a backlash across the Internet.[19] Symoné's rejection of racial labels and embracing of a raceless American identity are not realistic for most non-white Americans.[20] The post-racial-era ideals and colorblind ideology she promoted erases blackness and denies the persistence of racism. Writing on the problems of black celebrities transcending race, Maisha Z. Johnson argues, "colorblind approaches to race just mean valuing whiteness over other racial identities. . . . Society teaches black folks we have to overcome our Blackness to be valued"

[17] NAACP Image Awards," *NAACP.org*, n.d., accessed September 9, 2015. Her biography includes performances in some of the most recognized black sitcoms in television history, including *The Cosby Show* (1989–1992), *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* (1993–1997), and guest appearances on the groundbreaking black TV shows *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1992) and *A Different World* (1989). Symoné also starred in her own show on the Disney channel, *That's So Raven* (2003–2007), one of the few Disney programs with a primarily black cast and star. As a young adult, Symoné regularly received award nominations from the BET Comedy Awards and the NAACP Image Awards for her performances in *That's So Raven*, *Kim Possible*, and *The Cheetah Girls*. From 2004–2007, Symoné won NAACP Image Awards for "Outstanding Performance in a Youth/Children's Program-Series or Special" indicating that she was recognized not only for her "outstanding achievements" as a talented actress but also for her contributions to "the struggle for greater participation by African Americans in the entertainment industry."

[18] Raven-Symoné, "Where Are They Now?" Interview with Oprah Winfrey, TV, October 5, 2014, accessed September 5, 2015.

[19] Raven-Symoné, "Where Are They Now?" Interview with Oprah Winfrey, TV, October 5, 2014, accessed September 5, 2015. See Emilee Linder. "The Internet almost exploded after Raven-Symoné said 'I'm not African American – I'm American' in an Oprah Winfrey interview."

[20] Ibid.

because black identity and achieving success are not compatible.[21] Thus, the closer black celebrities come to mirroring those in the dominant culture, the more common it is for them to be viewed as transcending stereotypes of black identity. Thus, the limited view of black success is that in which celebrities exceed the stereotypes and come to be viewed as "other than black," rather than allowing blackness to encompass multiple social and economic statuses.[22] This conditional acceptance washes away blackness with success and supports the idea that the only way to defy stereotypes of blackness is to be less black in public.

"New Blackness" has become a popular debate within black websites, blogs, and on Black Twitter because it centers on black celebrities, rather than society, choosing to erase their own black identity and affiliations.[23] "New Black," sentiment resembles post-racial claims that race and skin color no longer matter. Symoné's assertion, "I'm an American. That's a colorless person" is a way of participating in her own racial erasure and reaffirms a colorblind view of race that often only benefits whites.[24] However, the supporters of the "New Black" philosophy deem oppression and racism as choices; they "put the onus of racism on black people."[25] Stars including Pharrell, Kanye West, and Common "have become a vocal cadre of black celebritydom that is calling for the black community to basically 'get over it.'"[26]

---

[21] Maisha Z. Johnson, "Don't Erase Prince's Race – 5 Reasons to Celebrate Unconventional Black Heroes," *Everyday Feminism*, April 25, 2016, accessed May 1, 2017.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Black Twitter is a large group of Twitter users that connect over social justice topics and issues that pertain to black Americans. Their online conversations and tweets are connected and spread through the use of hashtags.

[24] Raven-Symoné, "Where Are They Now?" See also musician Pharrell, who stated, similarly, "The New Black dreams and realizes that it's not a pigmentation; it's a mentality." Safy-Hallan Farah, "New Blackness: Pharrell, Kanye and Jay-Z and the Spectre of White Aspiration," *Pitchfork*, January 7, 2015, accessed September 10, 2015.

[25] Farah.

[26] Stereo Williams, "Common, Pharrell, and 'The New Black': An Ignorant Mentality That Undermines the Black Experience," *The Daily Beast*, March 19, 2015, accessed September 18, 2015.

Radical assertions by those few in the public light who believe they have transcended the effects of discrimination can detract from the persistent racial inequality that most people of color experience on a daily basis. While black fans seek positive racial representations, some African American performers want to be seen beyond their race, especially after achieving success in racially fraught industries such as Hollywood. The freedom from categories and the ability to embrace or reject ethnic and racial classifications at will has consistently separated whites and blacks. Part of achieving the American Dream has been the possibility for self-determination. Being boxed in by identity markers that no one can change but which are adaptable by those in the dominant racial group reiterates white privilege.

Symoné's eventual claiming of a black identity did little to rectify her image; however, timely guest appearances on *Empire* and *Black-ish* were visual reminders of her connection to the African American community and her ability to continue to break barriers for black actresses. Both roles were on shows that have changed television by including black and multiracial casts where the primary characters come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Both shows also include gay characters. Regarding the significance of her role on *Black-ish*, Symoné stated, "Everybody deserves the right to look at the TV and see themselves."[27] On *Black-ish*, Symoné gave visibility to both black and LGBTQ communities in her portrayal of a gay black woman, someone who rarely exists on screen.

Roxanne Jones, founding editor and former Vice President of *ESPN* Magazine empathized with Symoné precisely because of the discrimination and lack of agency to self-identify that many women of color and gay women experience on and off screen. She asserted

[27] Aisha I Jefferson, "Raven-Symoné Talks Black LGBT Characters, Makes 'Black-ish' Debut," *Xfinity: TV Blog*, May 6, 2015, accessed September 8, 2015.

that being black in the United States is neither a choice, nor severable from being American.[28] Roxanne Jones acknowledged, "Raven's dilemma is part of the black experience in America. Our identity is not really a matter of choice."[29] Despite Symoné's rejection of labels, it is unlikely that those who understood her as black will see her as other than African American. Her skin color, appearance, and having played black characters for her entire acting career mark her as black. Due to the ongoing oppression of blacks in the United States, Roxanne Jones supports Symoné's not wanting to publicly engage with racial identifications.[30] On and off screen blacks remain marginalized despite moves toward inclusivity and racial progressiveness. Colorism and racial divisiveness prevent most non-whites from ever being "colorless" in America.

Limits on Mixed Race Performers Playing Black Characters

Progress for mixed-race performers can come with a new set of limits on their performing across races. While they are able to cross-racially perform due to the ways their races can be coded, when mixed performers are chosen over single-race African or African American performers to play a black character, it is often seen as colorism that privileges lighter skin, European phenotypes, or star power rather than ability to visually embody a character. While mixed performers are no longer severely limited because they are unable to play a specific race; they can still remain too distinct from audiences' visual expectations of a single-race character to properly embody them. For example, though Maya Rudolph was able to impersonate a wide array of black celebrities on *SNL*, some mixed and light-skinned black actresses have recently been deemed inappropriate choices to portray well-known black women on screen. In 2013,

[28] Roxanne Jones, "Raven-Symoné, We Are Black Americans," *CNN.com*, October 9, 2014, accessed September 8, 2015.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. "Sometimes it feels like society is at once confused, intrigued, and resentful of my blackness."

mixed-race Dominican, Puerto Rican, Lebanese, and Haitian actress Zoe Saldana was cast as singer Nina Simone in a biopic *Nina*, and Thandie Newton was chosen to play Olanna in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's screen adaptation of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Immediately, fans of Simone and those of Adichie's novel, African and African American activists, and film critics denounced both actresses as wrong for the roles. These fans and critics deemed skin privilege a major reason behind mixed and light-skinned black actresses gaining roles that should have gone to darker-skinned black actresses out of respect for authentic portrayals. Critics such as Tanzina Vega believed Saldana and Newton were chosen because of their fame, beauty, and ability to increase the films' marketability.[31] The two were also believed to be more palatable to general audiences due to their mixed ancestry.[32] Despite moves toward expanding the category of black identity, there was quick retaliation against directors and the actresses themselves when it appeared that celebrity status took precedence over accurate representations of black women.

Though Saldana and Newton identify as black and have played black lead characters, both fit a mixed image that deviates from a single-race African American appearance and is unattainable for most black performers. Dark-skinned actresses are among the least likely to get work in Hollywood; they are even passed over for roles as dark-skinned characters. Black actresses today gain positive attention not only for their talent, but for physical appearances that encompass not only black ancestry, but also features that are European or, in Saldana's case, Latin, thus placing higher value on Western standards of beauty.

[31] See Tanzina Vega, "Stir Builds Over Actress to Portray Nina Simone," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2012, accessed September 17, 2015.

[32] Vega. Saldana is part Dominican and part Puerto Rican. She often plays Latina characters from various ethnic groups. She has also played racially mixed characters, and many of her roles have been in sci-fi films or films with hybrid and mutant characters.

Saldana's casting caused immediate fan backlash; despite having black ancestry, her appearance differs greatly from Simone's.[33] The shape of their facial features such as their mouths and nose are vastly different; Saldana's skin and hair are also several shades lighter. Race in the twenty-first century is more fluid and expansive than ever before, yet there is also more complexity regarding who can stand for a particular race. Black identity encompasses multiple geographic regions, skin colors, cultures, ethnicities, and nationalities; however, due to decades of marginalization on screen, it can be controversial when light-skinned or mixed-race performers take on roles as single-race black characters. For mixed-race performers, despite not being or looking solely black, their inclusion in the category of black actresses adds visual diversity to an understanding of blackness. This is significant since race is often perceived by what is seen on the body. Saldana was criticized for accepting a role that many expected even she, as a racial minority and part-black performer, would understand as better suited for a darker-skinned actress.

Light skin is privileged over dark skin, and those with darker skin are routinely discriminated against; thus, Simone's observations of the way beauty is denied to dark-skinned women and the way blacks are oppressed in America still hold enormous weight today. What Simone was denied due to having skin that was the antithesis of Western beauty standards was mirrored when darker-skinned actresses were passed over in favor of a lighter skinned, racially mixed star.[34] Many critics such as Courtney Garcia took issue with Mort and the producers of the

[33] See Evelyn Diaz. "the Internet was ablaze with criticism. Bloggers were ranting, tweets were fired like missiles and an online petition calling for Mort to 'replace Zoe Saldana with an actress that actually looks like Nina Simone' garnered over 2,000 digital signatures in under 24 hours." (The petition had 11,482 supporters at last count.) The production company eventually responded to fan backlash, and work on the film was suspended for over two years. See Courtney Garcia, "Nina Simone Biopic Director, Producers Stand by Casting Zoe Saldana in Title Role." "Celebrities such as India Arie and Aretha Franklin . . . voiced concerns over the choice" of Saldana as Nina Simone.

[34] See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Nina Simone's Face," *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016.

biopic primarily because it "hypocritically fails to counter colorism when it would have been most appropriate to do so."[35] Colorism prevails when Hollywood directors and producers forgo casting a realistic depiction of a character in favor of a celebrity that can draw a larger crowd. Marc Lamont Hill of *Ebony* contends, "There is no greater evidence of how tragic things are for dark-skinned women in Hollywood than the fact that they can't get hired to play dark-skinned women."[36]

While Saldana's cross-racial casting caused controversy, some cross-racial performances are appropriate and considered necessary to open up roles to actors of color and modernize films to fit the racial diversity of the twenty-first century. Despite the controversy over her casting in *Nina,* Saldana spoke out in support of cross-racial performance that is used to create more opportunities for actors of color in roles that do not necessitate an actor of a specific race. In 2015, African American actor Michael B. Jordan caused a stir when he was cast in the role of Johnny Storm (a.k.a. the Human Torch) in the *Fantastic Four*.[37] Written in 1961, the original Storm was white with blonde hair and blue eyes. In 2015, fans were upset over Jordan being cast in the role. In response, Jordan wrote an op-ed piece in *Entertainment Weekly,* and Saldana publicly supported him via a *Facebook* message that went viral.[38] Jordan explained how stories, especially those featuring non-racially specific characters—and in this case, a non-human comic

---

"Simone was in possession of nearly every feature that we denigrated as children. And yet somehow she willed herself into a goddess. Simone was able to conjure glamour in spite of everything the world said about black women who looked like her. And for that she enjoyed a special place in the pantheon of resistance."

[35] Courtney Garcia, "Nina Simone Biopic Director, Producers Stand by Casting Zoe Saldana in Title Role."

[36] Qtd. in Pierpont.

[37] *Fantastic Four*, directed by Josh Tranks (20th Century Fox, 2015), Film.

[38] Zoe Saldana, "Bravo! Inspired By Michael's Essay," *Facebook*, May 23, 2015, accessed September 23, 2015. If we question why Michael has been cast to play the Human Torch in *Fantastic Four* then we must also question why Elizabeth Taylor played Cleopatra, why Angelina Jolie played Mariane Pearl in a Mighty Heart, why Laurence Olivier played Othello, Burt Lancaster in Apache, and the list goes on . . . and on. . . . However, many film critics and news sources mentioned how Saldana herself could have been added to the list of stars that cross-racially performed to play a darker-skinned person.

book character—could be rewritten in the present to resist erasing race and instead make films more racially inclusive by incorporating Hollywood's most marginalized actors.

Saldana and Jordan were both burdened by the responses to their cross-racial performances. However, public reactions showed two very different conceptions of racial acceptance. Saldana's playing a single-race, dark-skinned black musician reinforced colorism in Hollywood. The interrogation of her blackness, despite her part-black ancestry, revealed that Simone's fans saw her casting as valorizing light over darker skin. Jordan's casting and the willingness of the character's creator, Stan Lee, to have Storm played by an actor who looks nothing like the original (but where changing the character's race could be inclusive and racially progressive) shows some racial barriers can be broken.[39]

The Complexities with Racial Accuracy and Authenticity

Despite playing black characters and advocating for black women in Hollywood and media, Thandie Newton also experienced limits of acceptance of her black identity. She became a target of fan and media backlash after being cast in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, particularly by Nigerian and American fans of the novel. The film was Nigerian financed and directed, but it would star a British actress who was well regarded in America. While Adichie was not part of the decision to cast Newton, she supported the choice.[40] In fact, Adichie and Newton are quite similar in that they are outspoken about the marginalization of black women in Hollywood, but they also expand the category of blackness to encompass various skin colors and appearances.

[39] See Chris Lee, "Stan Lee Weighs in on Michael B. Jordan as the Human Torch in *Fantastic Four*," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 27, 2015, accessed September 24, 2015. The creator Stan Lee stated that many comic book fans are "outraged because they hate to see any change made on a series and characters they had gotten familiar with." He also remarked, "I think they're gonna get to love this character."

[40] See Susie Mesure, "Chimamanda Adichie: 'Dark-skinned Girls Are Never the Babes'," *Independent*, September 24, 2015. See also Julie Miller, "Thandie Newton on *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Struggling to Find Her Identity, and Hollywood's Ego Problem," *Vanity Fair*, September 27, 2013, accessed November 14, 2015.

As a writer who brings attention to colorism that plagues the black race, Adichie's support of Newton contradicts the way she politicizes racial inequalities that derive from having dark skin. Adichie is known for emphasizing how "her own life is dominated by the simple matter of skin tone: her dark, Nigerian, skin tone."[41] She discusses the complexities of race and the way it is a constructed, fluid, "stupid, absurd thing."[42] While her skin is dark, Adichie told interviewers and Newton that her brother's skin is lighter than Newton's—indicating that equating ancestry with skin color is not as simple as many presume. With such diversity in her own family, and given her desire to see an accomplished actress play Olanna, Adichie supported Newton's casting and emphasized the need to use an actress "who can do it well," even if she is not Nigerian.[43]

Initially, Newton's casting in *Half of a Yellow Sun* appeared to be another *Nina* controversy with a mixed black actress at the center, but several factors keep Newton's casting from being as problematic as Saldana's. First, while Newton's playing a Nigerian woman and member of the Igbo tribe was deemed inappropriate, her character was fictional and not an actual person. Second, as Adichie's creation, Olanna is described light-skinned compared to her twin.[44] Plus, the range of skin colors in Adichie's own family is an example of the variety of skin tones that can represent Nigerians, and the black cast was filled with a variety of skin tones, meaning that Newton's skin tone was not an anomaly at all.[45] Lastly, Newton played Olanna without leaning toward Blackface by darkening her skin the way she did in *W*.

---

[41] Mesure.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Samira Sawlani, "Film Review: Half Baked Yellow Sun," *Media Diversified*, October 18, 2013, accessed March 26, 2014, https://mediadiversified.org/2013/10/18/half-baked-yellow-sun/.

[45] Sawlani. There is skin color diversity within the cast of black actors, but "Newton is obviously the lightest."

Half of a Yellow Sun did not have problems with its release despite criticism over Newton's casting and Akunna's petition to cast a more accurate representation of an Igbo woman. The petition lists several reasons why casting a light-skinned, mixed actress is damaging to Nigerian women. However, it only received 536 signatures and did not put significant pressure on Nigerian director Biyi Bandele. However, Akunna was not alone in her disappointment with what looked like favoring mixed race and light skin over a more accurate representation. East African analyst Samira Sawlani stated that Newton's playing an Igbo woman is controversial because it supports skin tone hierarchy and places Nigerian actress, Genevieve Nnaji, in a minor role while British Newton is the film's female star.[46] Newton was viewed as taking a role from a darker-skinned actress and affirming that blackness can be represented by lighter skin and mixed race, thus further diminishing the already rare positive portrayals of dark-skinned women on screen.

Despite claims of being in the midst of a post-racial era, and heralding mixed celebrities as symbols of progress, Hollywood continues to place a higher value on whiteness; inclusion of black performers regularly privileges those whose ancestry is mixed, who appear racially ambiguous, or who can be coded as racially unmarked. Performers with an ambiguous appearance are desired because their look is non-racially specific. The fact that racially mixed performers such as Jones, Newton, and Rudolph are given more on-screen opportunities is progress, and the diversity afforded to black identity means that mixed black actresses might have increased opportunities in Hollywood (indeed, mixed performers are becoming regularly featured in films marketed toward a general—rather than niche—audience). However, their inclusion remains fraught; they have been cast as black characters even when they threaten the

[46] Sawlani.

accuracy and authenticity of the character and the integrity of the film, or else they are cast in roles where their black ancestry is constructed as white.

Racism and colorism bar black actors from lead roles in Hollywood productions, and racially mixed black performers regularly play characters detached from their own multifaceted racial identity that includes black ancestry. The film industry and the mainstream media perpetuate skin color hierarchy by observing it in society and then reflecting it back. In an era undergoing extreme racial turbulence, persistent social inequality, and increasing violence against blacks in America, the power that film, television, and media have to shape racial perceptions cannot be understated. As long as diverse and accurate representations of black identity remain absent from the screen, and black identity is criminalized, hidden, or constructed to resemble white, film, television, and the audiences that spend money to support these productions will reaffirm a distorted and biased view of racial acceptance.

As revealed by the analyses of racially mixed castings, those performers with black ancestry have been continually marginalized on screen, are only desired when their images hide their racial ancestry or resemble white, and are denied black roles or expression of their black identity when playing mixed or ambiguous characters. Jones, Newton, and Rudolph's career trajectories reveal the failing of a post-racial era and the pervasiveness of color-blind racism. Hollywood continually reminds performers with black ancestry that they are disposable or replaceable, even by those who lack recognizable black ancestry. This treatment of racial minorities in Hollywood continues to oppress actors of color and results in images that reaffirm both white privilege and the inferiority of non-whites and shows we are no where near being post-racism. As Frank Chin stated, in a voice filled with frustration and tired rage at the injustice

and the plight of all non-whites in Hollywood who vie for limited roles, “We can’t even play ourselves.”[47]

[47] *The Slanted Screen*, directed by Jeff Adachi (AAMM Productions, 2006), DVD.

Bibliography

"5 Highest Grossing Movies with Latino Stars." *Latinos Post*. Website. 11 Jan. 2016. 22 June 2016. http://www.latinospost.com/articles/82689/20160111/5-highest-grossing-movies-latino-stars.htm

12 Years a Slave. Dir. Steve McQueen. Perf. Chiwetel Ejiofor. *Fox Searchlight Pictures*. 2013. Film.

Abrams, Natalie. "Rashida Jones: Parks and Recreation is not *The Office*." *TVGuide*. 7 Oct. 2009. Web. 17 Mar 2016. http://www.tvguide.com/g00/news/jones-parks-office-1010620/?i10c.referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

"Actor and Comedian Fred Armisen Plays Not My Job." *Wait Wait…Don't Tell Me*. Npr.org. 21 Dec. 2012. Web. 16 June 2015. http://www.npr.org/2012/12/22/167800993/actor-and-comedian-fred-armisen-plays-not-my-job

Adkins, Keith Josef. "Rashida Jones and the Hollywood Shuffle." *The Root*. Website. 14 May 2009. Web. 11 Sept. 2010. http://www.theroot.com/rashida-jones-and-the-hollywood-shuffle-1790882548

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Knopf. 2006. Print.

---. "The Danger of a Single Story." Ted Global. Oxford, England. July 2009. Lecture.

Admin. "On Identifying with Our Biracial President: Maya Rudolph." *MixedRemixed*. Website. 8 Dec. 2014. Web. 15 Apr. 2015. http://www.mixedremixed.org/identifying-biracial-president-maya-rudolph/

Aigbokhaevbolo, Oris. "Half of a Yellow Sun Not for Nigerians." *This is Africa*. Website. 30 Nov. 2014. Web. 13 Feb. 2017. https://thisisafrica.me/half-yellow-sun-not-for-nigerians/

Akass, Kim and Janet McCabe. Eds. *Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006. Print.

Akunna, Ashley. "Reconsider Casting Half of a Yellow Sun." *Change.org*. Website. 2011. Web. 26 Mar. 2014. https://www.change.org/p/the-casting-of-thandie-newton-in-half-of-a-yellow-sun-reconsider-casting-of-half-of-a-yellow-sun

Albert, Janice. "Anna Deavere Smith." *California Association of Teachers of English*. Website. n.d. Web. 9 Dec. 2015. http://www.cateweb.org/CA_Authors/smith.html

Aldridge, Lisa. Qtd. in Michael Ventre. "Black Stars Don't Mean Hollywood is Color-Blind." *Today*. Website. 4 Feb. 2010. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. http://www.today.com/id/35146945/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/black-stars-dont-mean-hollywood-color-blind/

Allen, Kennedy. “Being Black: It’s Not the Skin Color.” *Philadelphia Weekly*. Website. 12 Nov. 2013. Web. 11 Aug. 2015.

Alston, Joshua. “*Deadline* is Super Sorry about that ‘Plague of Ethnic Actors’ Story.” *A.V. Club*. Website. 30 Mar. 2015. Web. 12 Jan. 2016. http://www.avclub.com/article/deadline-super-sorry-about-plague-ethnic-actors-st-217251

---. “Is Blackface Ever Ok?” *Newsweek*. Newsweek. 13 Mar. 2008. Web. 10 Jan 2017. http://www.newsweek.com/blackface-ever-ok-84601

Andreeva, Nellie. “Pilots 2015: The Year of Ethnic Casting.” *Deadline*. Website. 24 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 Dec. 2015. http://deadline.com/2015/03/tv-pilots-ethnic-casting-trend-backlash-1201386511/

Angyal, Chloe. “I Spent a Year Watching Rom-Coms and This is the Crap I Learned.” *Jezebel*. Website. 14 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Jan. 2016. http://jezebel.com/5884946/the-crappy-lessons-of-romantic-comedies

Atchity, Matt. *Rotten Tomatoes*. Flixster. n.d. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/

Away We Go. Dir. Sam Mendes. Perf. John Krasinski, Maya Rudolph. Focus Features, 2010. *Netflix*. DVD.

Baker, Whitney. “The Top 8 Leslie Knope Terms of Endearment.” *Paste*. Website. 27 May. 2014. Web. 3 June. 2016. https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/05/leslie-knope.html

Bailey, Frankie Y. “Screening Stereotypes.” *Women, Violence, and the Media: Readings in Feminist Criminology.* (Lebanon: Northeastern UP, 2009): 75-98 Print.

Barber, Lynden. “Flirting.” *Australian Screen*. Website. n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/flirting/clip2/

Barbera, Eric. “The Best Weird Compliments Leslie Gives Ann on *Parks and Recreation*.” *Vulture*. Website. 23 Feb. 2015. Web. 3 June. 2016. http://www.vulture.com/2015/02/leslie-knope-ann-perkins-compliments.html

Bardin, Bentley. “Meet Karen From the Office: Interview with Rashida Jones.” *Women’s Health Magazine*. Women’s Health Magazine, Mar. 2008. Web. 4 May 2011. http://www.womenshealthmag.com/sex-and-love/rashida-jones-interview

Barker, Andrew. “Film Review: Zoe Saldana in ‘Nina’”. *Variety*. Variety. 18 Apr. 2016. Web. 20 July 2016. http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/nina-review-zoe-saldana-1201753077/

Barris, Kenya, creator. *Black-ish*. ABC. KGO-TV, San Francisco. Season 1, 2014-2015. Television.

Bart, Peter and Mike Fleming Jr. "Bart & Fleming: A Mea Culpa; Frank Sinatra Re-Cast; Tent Pole Assembly Line." *Deadline*. Website. 29 Mar. 2015. Web. 13 Sept. 2016. http://deadline.com/2015/03/frank-sinatra-hbo-documentary-vice-media-transformers-avatar-star-wars-lord-of-the-rings-1201400803/

Bates, Karen Grisby. "'For Colored Girls' Counts on Fans, Not Critics." *NPR*. NPR. 5 Nov. 2010. Web. 17 May 2015. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131098008

Beloved. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, Thandie Newton. Buena Vista Pictures, 1998. Film.

Beltrán, Mary. "Mixed race in Latinowood: Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity in the Era of Dark Angels." *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP. 2008. 248-268. Print.

---. "*SNL*'s 'Fauxbama' Debate: Facing Off Over Millennial (Mixed-) Racial Impersonation." *Saturday Night Live and American TV*. Ed. Nick Marx, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 2013. 191-209. Web.

---. "The New Hollywood Racelessness: When Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multi-Racial) Will Survive." *Cinema Journal*. 44.2 (2005): 50-67.

---. "What's at Stake in Claims of Post-Racial Media." *FlowTV*. Website. 3 June 2010. Web. 30 Aug. 2016. http://www.flowjournal.org/2010/06/whats-at-stake-in-claims-of-post-racial-media/

Beltrán, Mary and Camilla Fojas. *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print.

---. "Mixed race in Hollywood Film and Media Culture." *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. 1-20 Print.

Bilal, Mohammed. "*Crash*: A Reconstruction of Cameron, Black Masculinity and Hip-Hop." *Crash Course: Reflections on the Film Crash for Critical Dialogues About Race, Power and Privilege*. Ed. Michael Benitez Jr. and Felicia Gustin. Emeryville, CA: The Institute for Democratic Education and Culture – Speak Out, 2007. 63-67. Print.

"Black Comedians on SNL: Eddie Murphy to Sasheer Zamata." *BET*. Website. Accessed 11 Jan. 2017.

Black-ish. ABC. KGO-TV, San Francisco. Season 1, 24 Sept. 2014-20 May 2015. Television.

"Black SNL Cast Members Through the Years." *The Root*. Website. 1 Oct. 2010. Web. 11 Jan. 2017. http://www.theroot.com/black-snl-cast-members-through-the-years-1790867871

Blay, Yaba. Interview with W. Kamu Bell. *Totally Biased with W.Kamu Bell*. 13 Nov. 2013. *YouTube*. 11 Aug. 2015.

Booth, Cathy. "Thandie Makes it Possible." *Time*. Time. 12 June 2000. Web. 30 Mar. 2017. http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,46557,00.html

Borrelli, Christopher. "Ava. Oprah. Oprah. Ava." *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago Tribune. 25 Oct. 2011. Web. 22 June 2015. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-10-25/entertainment/ct-ent-1026-maya-does-oprah-20111025_1_oprah-winfrey-harpo-studios-rosie-o-donnell

Boston Public. Creat. David E. Kelly. Perf. Jessica Gilsig and Chi McBride. (20th Century Fox Television. 2000-2004): Television.

Bowdre, Karen. "Romantic Comedies and the Raced Body." *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. Eds. Abbott, Stacey and Deborah Jemyn. London, I.B., Tauris and Co Ltd, 2009. 105-116.

Box Office Mojo. IMDB. n.d. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/

Bradley, Lloyd. "Fine and Thandie: Actress Thandie Newton sits close and spills the secrets of marital chemistry, saving the planet, and her sweet life flying beneath Hollywood's radar." *Best Life*. Best Life, Mar. 2007. Web. 1 Dec. 2010.

Bramlett-Solomon, Sharon. "Interracial Love on Television: What's Taboo Still and What's Not." *Critical Thinking about Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media*. Eds. Mary-Lou Galican and Debra L. Merskin. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009. Web. 85-93.

Bridesmaids. Dir. Paul Feig. Perf. Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph. *Universal Pictures,* 2011. *Amazon*. Web. 19 Feb. 2012.

Bromwich, Kathryn. "Thandie Newton: 'I needed to play someone who doesn't fit a stereotype." *The Guardian*. The Guardian. 19 July 2014. Web. 30 Apr. 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jul/20/thandie-newton-doesnt-fit-stereotype-half-a-yellow-sun

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Beyond Bombshells: The New Action Heroine in Popular Culture*. University, MS: UP of MS. 2015. Web.

Brown, Stacia L. "Rashida Jones and the Politics of Passing in Hollywood." *Uberlearner*. Website. 31 Mar. 2011. Web. 4 May 2011.

https://uberlearner.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/rashida-jones-the-politics-of-passing-in-hollywood/

Broyard, Bliss. *One Drop: My Father's Hidden Life, A Story of Race and Family Secrets*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2007. Print.

Busis, Hillary. "'Parks and Recreation': Love (and a Nasty Virus) is in the Air." *Entertainment Weekly*. Website. 28 Jan. 2011. Web. 2 Apr. 2016.

Butler, Meg. "15 Celebrities Most People Don't Know Are Black." *Madame Noir*. Website. 18 Sept 2013. 16 Jan. 2017. http://madamenoire.com/302769/celebrities-most-people-dont-know-are-black/

Buxton, Ryan. "Paul Haggis: I Wrote 'Crash' to 'Bust Liberals'." *Huffington Post*. Website. 9 June. 2014. Web. 4 Feb. 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/19/paul-haggis-crash_n_5511665.html

Byng, Rhonesha . "The Images of Black Women in Media Still 'Only Scratch the Surface,' Essence Study Finds." *The Huffington Post*. Website. 15 Oct. 2013. Web. 11 June 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/15/the-images-of-black-women-in-media_n_4102322.html

Cabrera, Daniella. "18 Mixed race Celebrities Who Are Diversifying Hollywood." *Bustle*. Website. 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 16 Jan. 2016. https://www.bustle.com/articles/49769-18-mixed-raced-celebrities-who-are-diversifying-hollywood

Callahan, Yesha. "Deadline Issues Apology for White-Tears-Filled 'Ethnic Casting' Article. *The Root*. Website. 30 Mar. 2015. Web. http://thegrapevine.theroot.com/deadline-issues-apology-for-white-tears-filled-ethnic-1790886338

Campbell, Miranda. "The Mocking Mockumentary and the Ethics of Irony." *The Journal of Culture and Education. Taboo*. 11.1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 53-56. Web. 2 Sept. 2011.

Canby, Vincent.. "Review/Film; First Love and Sarte, As a Youth Grows Up." *The New York Times.* The New York Times. 6 Nov. 1992. Web. 28 Sept. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/06/movies/review-film-first-love-and-sartre-as-a-youth-grows-up.html

Carroll, Rebecca. "Movie Review: *Celeste and Jesse Forever*." *Ebony*. Website. 8 Aug. 2013. Web. 2 Mar. 2015. http://www.ebony.com/entertainment-culture/movie-review-celeste-and-jesse-forever-448

Carter, Gregory T. "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed race Identities." *Mixed race Hollywood*. eds. Beltran, Mary and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. 203-220. Print.

Celeste and Jesse Forever. Dir. Lee Toland Krieger. Perf. Rashida Jones. Andy Samburg. Sony Pictures Classics, 2012. DVD.

Charity, Tom. "Review: 'SNL's Maya Rudolph Shines in *Away We Go*. *CNN Entertainment*. 5 June 2009. Web. 28 Apr. 2011. http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Movies/06/05/review.away.we.go/

Chasing Daybreak. Dir. Justin Leroy. Mavin Foundation, 2005. DVD.

Childs, Erica Chito. *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC. 2009. Print.

Cheung, Ariel. "Black Women's Progress Collides with Media Stereotypes." *USA Today*. USA Today. 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 25 May 2016. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/02/11/black-history-black-women/23266115/

Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. "'Look, an Asian!' The Politics of Racial Interpellation in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings." *Journal of Asian American Studies.* 11.1 (2008): 33. Web. 29 Aug. 2015.

"Civil Rights Organization Responds to Deadline Hollywood's Apology for Ethnic Castings Article." *Color of Change*. Website. 25 Mar. 2015. Web. 13 Sept. 2016. https://colorofchange.org/press/2015/3/31/deadline_hollywood/

Clifford, Laura. "Away We Go." *Reelingreviews.com*. Website. n.d. Web. 6 May 2011. http://www.reelingreviews.com/awaywego.htm

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "Nina Simone's Face." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic. 15 Mar. 2015. Web. 20 July 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/03/nina-simone-face/472107/

Coddett, Kerry. "The Real Problem with *SNL* and Casting Black Women." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic. 8 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 June 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/the-real-problem-with-snl-and-casting-black-women/281280/

Colby, Tanner. "*SNL*'s Real Race Problem." *Slate*. Website. 9 Jan. 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2017. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/01/saturday_night_live_will_sasheer_zamata_help_solve_the_show_s_race_problem.html

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Conley Mikaela. “More TV, Less Self-Esteem, Except for White Boys.” *ABC News*. Website. 30 May 2012. Web. 12 Nov. 2015. http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2012/05/30/more-tv-less-self-esteem-except-for-white-boys/

Costantinou, Marianne. “Chris Gardner Has Pursued Happiness, from the Glide Soup Kitchen to the Big Screen.” *SFGate*. SFGate, 10 Oct. 2005. Web. 13 May 2015. http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Chris-Gardner-has-pursued-happiness-from-the-2603361.php

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. “Here, a Hypocrite Lives: I Probably Get it Wrong on Leslie Jones but I Tried.” *TressieMC*. Website. 6 May 2014. Web. 10 Jan. 2017. https://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/here-a-hypocrite-lives-i-probably-get-it-wrong-on-leslie-jones-but-i-tried/

Craig-Henderson, Kellina. “Beauty, Sexualization, and Race.” *Black Women in Interracial Relationships: In Search of Love and Solace.* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011). Print.

Crash. Dir. Paul Haggis. Perf. Don Cheadle, Sandra Bullock, Thandie Newton. Lions Gate Films, 2005. DVD.

Cummings, Jozen. “‘For Colored Girls’: Thandie Newton on the Ensemble Cast and No Drama Set.” *The Wall Street Journal Speakeasy*. The Wall Street Journal Speakeasy. 4 Nov. 2010. Web. 15 May 2015. https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/11/04/for-colored-girls-thandie-newton-on-the-ensemble-cast-and-no-drama-set/

Cunningham, Phillip Lamarr. “Who’s Going to Play Michelle Obama?: *Saturday Night Live* and its Lack of Women of Color.” *Flow*. Website. 20 Mar. 2009. Web. 6 Aug. 2015. https://www.flowjournal.org/2009/03/who%E2%80%99s-going-to-play-michelle-obama-saturday-night-live-and-its-lack-of-women-of-colorphillip-lamarr-cunningham-bowling-green-state-university/

Dagbovie, Sika Aline. “Star Light, Star Bright, Star Damn Near White: Mixed race Superstars.” *The Journal of Popular Culture*. 40.2 (2007): 217-233. Print.

Dagbovie-Mullins, Sika A. *Crossing Black: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture*. Knoxville: U of T Press, 2013. Print.

Daily Mail Reporter. “Thandie Newton: How Do You Feel about Being Mixed-Race?” *Daily Mail UK*. Website. 10 Apr. 2009. Web. 19 Nov. 2013. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1168266/Thandie-Newton-How-feel-mixed-race.html

---. “Why White Cinema-Goers are Less Likely to Watch Movies with a Black Lead Actor.” *Daily Mail UK*. Website 12 May 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2015.

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1386096/White-cinema-goers-prefer-movies-cast-similar-race-says-study.html

Dargis, Manohla. “Deflating That Big, Puffy White Gown.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 12 May 2011. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. https://mobile.nytimes.com/2011/05/13/movies/bridesmaids-with-kristen-wiig-maya-rudolph-review.html

---.“Oliver Stone’s Vision Thing: Bush, the Family.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 16 Oct. 2008. 25 Nov. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/17/movies/17ston.html

Dawkins, Marcia. “Is Obama Now Black (Enough) Because He’s White?” *Huffington Post*. Website. 2 April 2012. Web. 13 Nov. 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-alesan-dawkins/what-the-mixed-kids-are-always-so-beautiful-meme-really-means_b_3792596.html

---.“Mixed Messages: Barak Obama and *Post*-Racial Politics.” Ed. Janani Subramanian. *Spectator*. 30:2 (Fall 2010): 9-17. Web.

---.“What the ‘Mixed Kids Are Always So Beautiful’ Meme Really Means.” *The Huffington Post*. Website. 22 Oct. 2013. Web. 15 June 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marcia-alesan-dawkins/what-the-mixed-kids-are-always-so-beautiful-meme-really-means_b_3792596.html

Demby, Gene. “Are We Laughing With Charles Ramsey?” *Code Switch*. Website. 7 May 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2015. http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/05/07/181982154/are-we-laughing-with-charles-ramsey

Demby, Gene and Kat Chow. “Rep Sweats, Or, I Don’t Know if I Like This but I Want it to Win.” *Code Switch: Race and Identity Remixed*. *NPR*. 22 June 2016. Podcast.

Diaz, Evelyn. “Commentary: Why Fans Turned Against Zoe Saldana, Zendaya: Casting the Actresses Doomed the Biopics of Nina Simone and Aaliyah.” *BET*. Website. 9 July 2014. Web. 16 Sept. 2015. http://www.bet.com/news/celebrities/2014/07/09/commentary-why-fans-turned-against-zoe-saldana-zendaya.html

Dolan, Jill. “For Colored Girls.” *The Feminist Spectator*. Website. 7 Nov. 2010. Web. 3 May 2011. https://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2010/11/07/for-colored-girls/

Dowd, Maureen. “The Women of Hollywood Speak Out.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 20 Nov. 2015. Web. 20 Dec. 2015. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/magazine/the-women-of-hollywood-speak-out.html

Drumming, Neil. “Goodbye to Ann Perkins: Can “Parks and Recreation” Still End on a High Note?” *Salon*. Website. 29 Jan. 2014. Web. 8 Nov. 2015. http://www.salon.com/2014/01/29/goodbye_to_ann_perkins_can_parks_and_recreation_still_end_on_a_high_note/

Duprey, David. “That Moment in Mission: Impossible II (2000): A Personal Betrayal.” *That Moment In*. Website. 18 Mar. 2015. Web. 30 Mar. 2017. http://thatmomentin.com/2015/03/18/that-moment-in-mission-impossible-ii-2000/

Ebert, Roger. “Away We Go.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. Chicago Sun-Times, 10 June 2009. Web. 12 May 2011. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/away-we-go-2009

---. “Beloved.” *RogerEbert.* Website. 16 Oct. 1998. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/beloved-1998

---. “Bridesmaids.” *RogerEbert*. Website. 11 May. 2011. 18 Jan. 2017. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bridesmaids-2011

---. “Jefferson in Paris.” *RogerEbert.* Website. 7 Apr. 1995. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jefferson-in-paris-1995

---. “*Mission: Impossible II*.” *Roger Ebert*. Website. 24 May. 2000. Web. 16 Oct. 2016. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mission-impossible-ii-2000

---. “The Best 10 Movies of 1992.” *RogerEbert*. Website. 31 Dec. 1992. Web. 22 Apr. 2016. http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-best-10-movies-of-1992

---. “W.” *RogerEbert.* Website. 15 Oct. 2008. Web. 21 Nov. 2015. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/w-2008

Elam, Michele. *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2011. Print.

Elfman, Mali. “Maya Rudolph Interview for Away We Go.” *ScreenCrave*. Website. 4 June 2009. Web. 12 May 2011.

Elliott, Belinda. “Chris Gardner: A Determined Father.” *CBN*. Website. n.date. 9 Oct. 2016. http://www1.cbn.com/movies/chris-gardner-determined-father

Ellis, Joseph. “Thomas Jefferson.” Interview. *U.S. History: Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium*. Website. Nov. 2000. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.

Ellwood, Gregory. “Review: Adam Scott and Maya Rudolph Shine in Very Funny ‘Friends with Kids’.” *Hitflix*. Website. 10 Sept. 2011. Web. 10 June 2015.

Empire. Season One. Fox. 7 Jan. 2015-18 Mar. 2015. Television.

EURnews. “Tracee Ellis Ross on *Black-ish* Theme of ‘What is Black.’ *Soundcloud*. Website. 2014. Web.

EW Staff, *50 Best High School Movies,* accessed September 9, 2015.

Fantastic Four. Dir. Josh Tranks. Perf. Miles Teller and Michael B. Jordan. *20th Century Fox.* 2015. Film.

Farah, Safy-Hallan. “New Blackness: Pharrell, Kanye and Jay-Z and the Spectre of White Aspiration.” *Pitchfork.* Website. 7 Jan. 2015. Web. 10 Sept. 2015. http://pitchfork.com/thepitch/631-new-blackness-pharrell-kanye-and-jay-z-and-the-spectre-of-white-aspiration/

Farhi, Paul. “Did ‘SNL’ Go Beyond the Pale With Fauxbama?” *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 29 Feb. 2008. Web. 25 June 2010. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/28/AR2008022803988.html

Fear, David. “Darwin, Dar-Lose: The Genius of ‘*Idiocracy*’.” *Rolling Stone*. Rolling Stone. 1 Oct. 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/the-genius-of-idiocracy-20141001

Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: Samuel L. Jackson, Condoleezza Rice and Ruth Simmons. Prod. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Writ. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. KQED. 29 Apr. 2012. Web. *YouTube.* 25 Nov. 2015.

Flirting. Dir. John Duigan. Perf. Noah Taylor, Thandie Newton, Nicole Kidman. 1991. Film. MGM. DVD. 2002.

Fogel, Matthew. “*Grey’s Anatomy* Goes Colorblind.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 8 May 2005. Web. 12 Sept. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/08/arts/television/greys-anatomy-goes-colorblind.html

Fojas, Camilla. “The Biracial Baby Boom and the Multiracial Millennium.” *War Baby/Love Child: Mixed race Asian American Art*. Eds. Laura Kina & Wei Ming Dariotis. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2013. Print. 225-229.

For Colored Girls. Dir. Tyler Perry. 2010. Perf. Thandie Newton, Whoopi Goldberg. Lions Gate, 2011. DVD.

Fox, Jesse. ‘“Up All Night’ Appears to Be Canceling The Ava Show.” *Splitsider*. Website. 1 Aug. 2012. 15 May. 2015. http://splitsider.com/2012/08/up-all-night-appears-to-be-canceling-the-ava-show/

Freaks and Geeks. Dir. Paul Feig and Judd Apatow. Perf. Linda Cardellini, John Francis Daley, James Franco. *Paramount Worldwide*. 1999-2000, DVD.

Friends with Kids. Dir. Jennifer Westfelt. Perf. Adam Scott, Jennifer Westfelt. *Lionsgate Roadside Attractions*. 2011. *Amazon*. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

Froelich, Amanda. "This is What Americans Will Look Like By 2050 – and its Stunning." *The Mind Unleashed*. Website. 21 Apr. 2014. Web. 24 Apr. 2015. http://themindunleashed.com/2014/04/americans-will-look-like-2050-stunning.html

Frostrup, Mariella. "Why We're Still Seduced By the Romcom." *The Guardian*. Website. 17 Sept. 2011. Web. 12 Jan. 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/sep/17/romcoms-chemistry-crazy-stupid-love

Funderberg, Lisa. "Changing Faces." *National Geographic*. National Geographic. Oct. 2013. Web. 24 Apr. 2015. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/10/changing-faces/funderburg-text

Gadson, Marcella. "#MediaImagesMatter: The Cause and Effect of Media Stereotypes on People of Color." *Broadband & Social Justice*. Website. 27 Feb. 2015. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. http://broadbandandsocialjustice.org/2015/02/mediaimagesmatter-the-cause-and-effect-of-media-stereotypes-on-people-of-color

Gallagher, Edward J. "Reel American History: Films – Jefferson in Paris (1995). digital.lib.lehigh.edu. Website. n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/reel_new/films/list/0_55

Garber, Megan. "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals." *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic. Web. 28 May 2015. Web. 4 Jan. 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/05/how-comedians-became-public-intellectuals/394277/

Garcia, Courtney. "Nina Simone Biopic Director, Producers Stand by Casting Zoe Saldana in Title Role." *theGrio*. Website. 3 June 2013. Web. 22 Sept. 2015. http://thegrio.com/2013/06/03/nina-simone-biopic-director-producers-stand-by-casting-zoe-saldana-in-title-role/

---. "What Happened to Black Family Sitcoms on Network TV?" *theGrio*. Website. 30 Sept. 2013. Web. 21 Aug. 2015. http://thegrio.com/2013/09/30/what-happened-to-black-family-sitcoms-on-network-tv/

G.I. Joe Retaliation. Dir. John M. Chu. Perf. Dwayne Johnson. *Paramount Pictures*, 2013. Film.

Giambrone, Joe. "*Idiocracy* (2006) Re-visited." *Counterpunch*. Website. 3 June 2011. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. https://www.counterpunch.org/2011/06/03/idiocracy-2006-re-visited/

Gilmore, Karen. “Flashback: Rashida Jones on ‘Freaks and Geeks.’” *Reel Artsy*. Website. 15 Sept. 2009. Web. 27 Oct. 2010. http://www.reelartsy.com/2009/09/flashback-rashida-jones-on-freaks-and.html

Glitter. Dir. Vondie Curtis Hall. Perf. Mariah Carey. *20th Century Fox*, 2001. Film.

Goldman, Adria Y. and Vanatta S. Ford, Alexa A. Harris, Natasha R. Howard. Eds. He Said, She Said: Tyler Perry’s Words (in Black Women’s Mouths).” *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*. Lexington Books, Lanham, MD. 2014. Web.

Gong, Louie. Interview with Barack Obama. *Chasing Daybreak: A Film about Mixed race in America*. 2005. *YouTube*. 24 Feb. 2014. Web. 3 Sept. 2015.

Gordon-Reed, Annette. *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1997. Print.

Gorton, Thomas. “Hollywood Doesn’t Give People of Colour Many Lines.” *Dazed*. Website. July 2015. Web. 1 June 2016. http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/25281/1/hollywood-doesnt-give-people-of-colour-many-lines

Gray, Herman S. *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. Print.

Greenberg, Jon. “7 Reasons Why ‘Colorblindness’ Contributes to Racism Instead of Solves it.” *Everyday Feminism*. Website. 23 Feb. 2015. Web. 7 Sept. 2016. http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/02/colorblindness-adds-to-racism/

Grey’s Anatomy. Creat. Shonda Rhimes. Perf. Ellen Pompeo. *Shondaland*. *Buena Vista Home Entertainment*. 2005. Television.

Grierson, Tim. “Is *Crash* Truly the Worst Best Picture?” *New Republic*. Website. 24 Feb. 2016. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. https://newrepublic.com/article/130381/crash-truly-worst-best-picture

Gritten, David. “Going Through the Years in 'Voice' and 'Flirting' : Movies: Writer-director John Duigan's trilogy tackles the formative years of growing up in a small Australian town.” *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times. 27 Nov. 1992. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. http://articles.latimes.com/1992-11-27/entertainment/ca-1060_1_john-duigan

Grown Ups. Dir. Dennis Dugan. Perf. Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Chris Rock. *Columbia Pictures*, 2010. *YouTube*. Web. 6 Jan. 2016.

Grown Ups 2. Dir. Dennis Dugan. Perf. Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Chris Rock. *Columbia Pictures*, 2013. *YouTube*. Web. 7 Jan, 2016.

Guess Who? Dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan. Perf. Bernie Mac, Aston Kutcher, Zoe Saldana. *Columbia Pictures*, 2005. Film.

Guest, Jocelyn. "The Comedian-in-Chief." *The Daily Beast*. Website. 20 Nov. 2008. Web. 16 Jan. 2017.

Guthman, Edward. "Jefferson' Gets Lost in Paris/Merchant-Ivory Keep Audience After Class in History Lecture." *SFGate*. 7 Apr 1995. Web. 23 June 2017. http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Jefferson-Gets-Lost-in-Paris-Merchant-Ivory-3037777.php

Half of a Yellow Sun. Dir. Biyi Bandele. Perf. Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton. Metro International, 2013. Film.

Hangin' with Mr. Cooper. Creat. Jeff Franklin. Perf. Mark Curry. *ABC*. 1992-1997. Television.

Harvey, Dennis. "Review: 'Mission: Impossible 2." *Variety*. 24 May 2000. Web. 28 June 2017. http://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/mission-impossible-2-2-1200462090/

HBO.com. Website. *HBO Documentaries.* "The Black List: Volume Two." n.d. Web. 8 June 2015.

Henderson, Odie. "Nina." *Rogerebert.com*. Website. 22 Apr. 2016. Web. 8 Mar. 2017. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/nina-2016

Hollinger, David A. "The Concept of Post-Racial: How its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions. *Daedalus*. 140:1. (2011): 174-182. Print. 174.

Honeycutt, Kirk. "For Colored Girls: Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. Website. 21 Oct. 2010. Web. 9 Apr. 2015. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/colored-girls-film-review-32056

hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Web.

---. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print.

Hoopes, Tom. "Oliver Stone's '*W.*' Backfires." *CBS News*. Website. 24 Oct. 2008. Web. 25 Nov. 2015. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/oliver-stones-w-backfires/

Horowitz, Simi. "Ethnic Ambiguity: More Roles, but Still a Mixed Bag." *Backstage*. Website. 14 July 2014. Web. 17 Dec. 2015. https://www.backstage.com/news/ethnic-ambiguity-more-roles-but-still-a-mixed-bag/

Horton, Yuri and Raagen Price, Eric Brown. "Portrayal of Minorities in the Film, Media, and Entertainment Industries." *Poverty & Prejudice: Media and Race*. *Edge*. Website. 1 July

1999. Web. 14 Dec. 2015. https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/portrayal.htm

How to Get Away With Murder. Creat. Peter Nowalk. Perf. Viola Davis. *Shondaland*. 2014. Television.

Hunt, Darnell and Ana-Christina Ramón. *2015 Hollywood Diversity Report: Flipping the Script*. Los Angeles: Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA. (2015): i-63. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Hunter, Margaret L. *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Hurricane Season. Dir. Tim Story. Perf. Forest Whitaker, Taraji P. Henson, Isaiah Washington. Dimension Films. 2010. DVD.

Hutchinson, Sikvu. "Gender Crash." *Black Fem Lens*. Website. 16 Sept. 2005. Web. 1 Dec. 2010.

"Hysterical Silence: Rashida Jones and Race in the Movies." *Take Two Movie Review*. Website. 19 Mar. 2009. Web. 7 June 2016.

Idiocracy. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Luke Wilson, Maya Rudolph. 20th Century Fox. 2007. DVD.

Ifeanyi, KC. "The Last Taboo: Will Smith, 'Focus,' and Hollywood's Interracial Couples Problem." *Fast Company*. Website. 2 Mar. 2015. Web. 16 July 2015. https://www.fastcompany.com/3043046/the-last-taboo-will-smith-focus-and-hollywoods-interracial-couples-problem

I Love You, Man. Dir. John Hammond. Perf. Paul Rudd, Jason Segal, Rashida Jones. Paramount Home Video, 2009. DVD.

IMDb.com. Website. "Character Quotes from Tom Haverford (Character) from *Parks and Recreation* (2009)." n. d. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.

Inherent Vice. Dir. Paul Thomas Anderson. Perf. Joaquin Phoenix and Josh Brolin. Warner Bros. Pictures. 2014. Film.

Itzkoff, Dave. "Juggling a Comedy Series about Juggling Life's Tasks." *The New York Times.* The New York Times. 9 Sept. 2011. Web. 22 June 2015. https://mobile.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/arts/television/maya-rudolph-appears-in-the-series-up-all-night.html

Jacobs, Matthew. "A Decade After 'Crash,' Paul Haggis Reflects on the Polarizing Racial 'Fable' That Stormed the Oscars." *The Huffington Post*. Website. 6 May 2015. Web. 3

Oct 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/06/paul-haggis-crash_n_7216026.html

Jacobs, Tom. "Why Whites Avoid Movies with Black Actors." *Pacific Standard*. Website. 4 May 2011. 18 Apr. 2015. https://psmag.com/social-justice/why-whites-avoid-movies-with-black-actors-30890

Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. Print.

Jefferson, Aisha I. "Raven-Symoné Talks Black LGBT Characters, Makes 'Black-ish' Debut." *Xfinity: TV Blog*. Website. 6 May 2015. Web. 8 Sept. 2015. http://my.xfinity.com/blogs/tv/2015/05/06/raven-symone-talks-black-lgbt-characters-makes-black-ish-debut/

Jefferson in Paris. Dir. James Ivory. Perf. Nick Nolte. Buena Vista Pictures, 1995. Film.

Johnson, Brett. "Did Tyler Perry Pull it Off? 'For Colored Girls' Thandie Newton Weighs In." *Black Enterprise*. Black Enterprise. 8 Nov. 2010. Web. 5 May 2015. http://www.blackenterprise.com/lifestyle/did-tyler-perry-pull-it-off-for-colored-girls-actress-thandie-newton-weighs-in/

Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

Johnson, Maisha Z. "Don't Erase Prince's Race – 5 Reasons to Celebrate Unconventional Black Heroes." *Everyday Feminism*. Website. 25 Apr. 2016. Web. 1 May 2017. http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/04/prince-unconventional-black-heroes/

Johnson, Todd Aaron. "Maya Rudolph on Life, Laughs, & Wigging Out (Interview)." *Biography.com*. Website. 18 Aug. 2016. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. https://www.biography.com/news/maya-rudolph-biography-interview

Jones, Rashida. Interview with Aziz Ansari. *Anthem Magazine*. Spring 2009. Web. 6 June 2016.

Jones, Rashida. Interview with Sean O'Neal. *A.V. Club Magazine*. Website. 8 Apr. 2009. Web. 21 Oct. 2010.

Jones, Roxanne. "Raven-Symoné, We Are Black Americans." *CNN.com*. Website. 9 Oct. 2014. Web. 8 Sept. 2015. http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/08/opinion/jones-raven-simone-oprah-black/index.html

Jordan, Michael B. "Why I'm Torching the Color Line." *Entertainment Weekly*. *Entertainment Weekly*. Website. 22 May 2015. Web. 24 Sept. 2015. http://ew.com/article/2015/05/22/michael-b-jordan-fantastic-four-race/

Joseph, Ralina L. *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. Print.

---. "Tyra Bands is Fat": Reading (Post-) Racism and (Post-) Feminism in the New Millennium." *Critical Studies in Media*. 26.3 (2009): 237-254. Web.

Judice, Cheryl Y. *Interracial Marriage Between Black Women and White Men*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008. Print.

Jung, E. Alex. "Thandie Newton's Story of Sexual Abuse During an Audition is Still Horrifying." *Vulture*. Website. 1 July 2016. Web. 24 Feb. 2017. http://www.vulture.com/2016/07/thandie-newtons-sexual-abuse-still-horrifies.html

Juzwiak, Rich. "Raven-Symoné: I Don't Want to Be Labeled Gay or African American." *Gawker*. Website. 6 Oct. 2014. Web. 11 Sept. 2015. http://gawker.com/raven-symone-i-dont-want-to-be-labeled-gay-or-african-1642871740

"Karen Filippelli." *Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press*. Website. n.d. 31 Oct. 2015. Web.

Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele. Interview with Terry Gross. "For Key And Peele, Biracial Roots Bestow Special Comedic 'Power'." *Fresh Air*. 20 Nov. 2013. Web. 6 Jan. 2017.

Keegan, Rebecca. "USC Study: Minorities Still Under-Represented in Popular Films." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 30 Oct. 2013. Web. 11 Feb. 2014. http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/30/entertainment/la-et-mn-race-and-movies-20131030

Keeping Up With the Kardashians. Producer. Ryan Seacrest. Perf. Kim Kardashian. *Ryan Seacrest Productions*, 2007-2017. Television.

"Kim Kelly is My Friend." *Freaks and Geeks*. Writ. Paul Feig and Judd Apatow. Dir. Jake Kasdan and Judd Apatow. Netflix, 2008. Web.

Kim Possible. Creat. Bob Schooley. Perf. Christy Carlson Ramano. *Walt Disney Television Animation. Disney Channel Original Productions.* 2003-2007. Television.

Kohen, Yael. *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Web.

La Ferla, Ruth. "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous." *New York Times*. New York Times, 28 Dec. 2003. Web. 25 Oct. 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/28/style/generation-ea-ethnically-ambiguous.html

Lam. Tatiana. "For Colored Girls: Discerning the True Pain in Tyler Perry's Melodrama." *Broad Recognition*. Broad Recognition. 29 Dec. 2010. Web. 17 May 2015.

http://www.broadrecognitionyale.com/2011/01/23/for-colored-girls-discerning-the-true-pain-in-tyler-perrys-melodrama/

Lamont, Tom. “Maya Rudolph: I’m Not a Woman in Comedy. I’m a Comedian.” *The Guardian*. Website. 5 Dec. 2015. Web. 8 Dec. 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/dec/05/maya-rudolph-im-not-a-woman-in-comedy-im-a-comedian-saturday-nigh-live-bridesmaids-sisters

Lang, Nico. “Why the Internet Loves to Laugh at Poor Black People.” *Daily Dot*. Website. 30 Jan. 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2015. https://www.dailydot.com/via/american-flag-vine-internet-mockery/

Larbi, Miranda. “28 Celebrities You Probably Didn’t Know Were Mixed-Race.” *Buzzfeed*. Website. 2 Dec. 2015. Web. 16 Jan. 2016. https://www.buzzfeed.com/mirandalarbi/celebrities-you-probably-didnt-know-were-mixed-race

Late Night with Jimmy Fallon. Season 1, Episode 31. Writ. Michael Blieden. Perf. Jimmy Fallon, Rashida Jones. 20 Apr. 2009. Television. 1 Nov. 2010. Web.

Lee, Chris. “Stan Lee Weighs in on Michael B. Jordan as the Human Torch in *Fantastic Four*. *Entertainment Weekly*. Entertainment Weekly. 27 July 2015. Web. 24 Sept. 2015. http://ew.com/article/2015/07/27/stan-lee-michael-b-jordan-human-torch-fantastic-four/

Lennox, Cecil. “Raven-Symoné Gets Impeached By Black Twitter for Renouncing Being Called African-American [Photos]. *Hip-Hop Wired*. Website. 6 Oct. 2014. Web. 8 Sept. 2015. http://hiphopwired.com/413188/raven-symone-oprah-interview-black-twitter/

Lewis, Sian. “Thandie Newton: ‘Condi Was My Hardest Role Ever’.” *Independent*. Website. 31 Oct. 2008. Web. 26 Mar. 2014. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/thandie-newton-condi-was-my-hardest-role-ever-979864.html

Lim, Thea. “The Wormiest of Cans: Who Gets to Be ‘Mixed race’”? *Racialicious*. Website. 12 Jul. 2011. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.

Linder, Emilee. “Raven-Symoné to Oprah: I’m Not African-American – I’m American.”” *MTV*. Website. 6 Oct. 2014. Web. 17 Sept. 2015. http://www.mtv.com/news/1954009/raven-symone-gay-african-american/

---. “Raven-Symoné Responds to Internet Backlash: ‘I Never Said I Wasn’t Black.’” *MTV*. Website. 8 Oct. 2014. Web. 17 Sept. 2015. http://www.mtv.com/news/1957694/raven-symone-african-american-black-oprah/

Litman, Juliet. “Know Your Rom-Coms: 6 Tropes of the Genre’s Golden Age.” *Grantland*. Grantland. 21 July 2014. Web. 16 Sept. 2016. http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/know-your-rom-coms-6-tropes-of-the-genres-golden-age/

Lloyd, Robert. “2 Good 2 Be 4Gotten: An Oral History of *Freaks and Geeks*.” *Vanity Fair*. Vanity Fair, Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Mar. 2013. http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/01/freaks-and-geeks-oral-history

Looch, Cassam. “Interview: Carmen Ejogo.” *Movievortex*. Website. n.date. Web. 17 May 2011.

Loving v. Virginia. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

Lule, Cristina. “86 Years a Snub-The Struggle for Black Actors in Hollywood.” *Awards Circuit*. Website. 12 Mar. 2014. Web. 7 Jan. 2016. http://www.awardscircuit.com/2014/03/12/86-years-snub-struggle-black-actors-hollywood/

Lusca, Emanuel. “Race as a Social Construct.” *Anthropology.net*. Website. 1 Oct. 2008. Web. 12 Nov. 2015. https://anthropology.net/2008/10/01/race-as-a-social-construct/

Lyons, Margaret. “How Do You Solve *Parks and Rec’s* Ann Perkins Problem?” *Vulture*. Website. 16 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

---. *Parks and Rec* Will Be Fine Without Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones-and Maybe Better.” *Vulture*. Website. 1. Aug. 2013. Web. 8 Nov. 2015.

Macdonald, Soraya Nadia. “SNL’ Lacks Diversity in the Cast, and the Writers’ Room.” *The Washington Post*. 3 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/11/03/snl-lacks-diversity-in-the-cast-and-in-the-writers-room/

Malec, Brett. “Rashida Jones Explains to Reporter Why She Looked So "Tan" at the SAG Awards: "I'm Ethnic."” *ENews*. Website. 26 Jan. 2015. Web. 18 June 2016. http://www.eonline.com/news/618531/rashida-jones-explains-to-reporter-why-she-looked-so-tan-at-the-sag-awards-i-m-ethnic

Marchetti, Gina. *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.

Marcus, Bennett. “Fred Armisen Performs in ‘Honeyface’.” *New York Magazine*. New York Magazine. 13 Mar. 2008. http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2008/03/fred_armisen_does_not_wear_bla.html

Marron, Dylan. *Every Single Word Spoken by a Person of Color in “(500) Days of Summer.” YouTube*. 19 June 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkXf5IwVmXw

Marquez, Yvonne S. “Raven Doesn’t Want to Be Labeled ‘Gay’ or ‘African-American;’ Most of Us Don’t Get the Choice.” *Autostraddle*. Website. 9 Oct. 2014. Web. 11 Sept. 2015. https://www.autostraddle.com/raven-doesnt-want-to-be-labeled-gay-or-african-american-most-of-us-dont-get-the-choice-257516/

Martin, Roland. “Hollywood’s Irrational Allergy to ‘Black Films’.” *CNN.com*. Website. 14 Jan. 2012. Web. 13 July 2015. http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/14/opinion/martin-red-tails-hollywood/index.html

Martin, Jr. Waldo E. “Precious African American Memories, Post-Racial Dreams, and the American Nation.” *Daedalus*. 140:1. (2011): 67-78.

Maslin, Janet. “Beloved (1998): Film Review; No Peace From a Brutal Legacy.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 16 Oct. 2008. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/19981016friday.html

---. “Film Review; Jefferson’s Entanglements, In History and in Love.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 31 Mar. 1995. Web. 10 Oct. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/31/movies/film-review-jefferson-s-entanglements-in-history-and-in-love.html

Matthews, Jack. “Hollywood Knocks Down the Racial Barriers in ‘M:I2,’ Tom Cruise and the Stunning Thandie Newton Make Love – and a Bit of Film History.” *New York Daily News*. New York Daily News. 31 May 2000. Web. 28 Sept. 2016. http://www.nydailynews.com/archives/nydn-features/hollywood-knocks-racial-barriers-m-i2-tom-cruise-stunning-thandie-newton-love-bit-film-history-article-1.862146

May-Curry, Michelle. “Dr. Rainbow Johnson: Tracee Ellis Ross and Mixed race on *Black-ish*.” *Kaleido[scopes]: Diaspora Re-Imagined*. Website. 21 Aug. 2015. Web. 21 Aug. 2015.

“Maya Rudolph’s Impressions.” *YouTube*. *The Ellen Show*. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 8 Jan. 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq2kZBfzUTM

“Maya Rudolph’s Rachel Dolezal Impression.” *YouTube. Late Night with Seth Meyers*. 23 June 2015. Web. 8 Jan. 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieowIzQwYvs

“Maya Rudolph Ready to Channel An Oprah-in-the-Making on ‘Up All Night’.” *Access Hollywood*. Website. 1 Aug. 2011. Web. 9 Jan. 2017. http://www.accesshollywood.com/articles/maya-rudolph-my-up-all-night-character-is-not-based-on-oprah-108256/

Maya Rudolph-The Black List Vol.2. Dir. Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Perf. Maya Rudolph. 2009. Video. Web. 8 June 2015.

McDonald, Patrick. “Interview: Thandie Newton on the Passion of ‘For Colored Girls.’” *HollywoodChicago.com*. 3 Nov. 2010. Web. 18 May 2015.

http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/12391/interview-thandie-newton-on-the-passion-of-for-colored-girls

McDonald, Soraya Nadia. "Hollywood's Highest-Paid Actresses, All White-Again." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post. 5 Aug. 2015. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/05/hollywoods-highest-paid-actresses-all-white-again/?utm_term=.043dc6eb18b2

---. "SNL Lacks Diversity in the Cast, and the Writers' Room." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post. 3 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/11/03/snl-lacks-diversity-in-the-cast-and-in-the-writers-room/?utm_term=.6d1fbd5ee355

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." 1989. *The National Seed Project*. Website. 2003. Web. 28 Apr. 2015. https://nationalseedproject.org/white-privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack

McKenzie, Mia. *Black Girl Dangerous: On Race, Queerness, Class and Gender*. Oakland, CA: BGD Press, 2014. Print.

McNary, Dave. "Show Business Diversity Trailing U.S. Demographics, UCLA Report Shows." *Variety*. Variety. 12 Feb. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. http://variety.com/2014/film/news/show-business-diversity-trailing-u-s-demographics-ucla-report-shows-1201098838/

Mercer, Amirah. "Hollywood's Problem with Women of Color is Even Worse Than You Realize." *Arts.Mic*. Website. 12 Mar. 2014. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. https://mic.com/articles/84899/hollywood-s-problem-with-women-of-color-is-even-worse-than-you-realize#.i5lIBO4sS

Mesure, Susie. "Chimamanda Aidchie: 'Dark-skinned Girls Are Never the Babes'." *Independent*. Website. 24 Sept. 2015. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/chimamanda-adichie-dark-skinned-girls-are-never-the-babes-8572145.html

Miller, Gerri. "The Daughter of Q." *American Jewish Life Magazine.* Jan/Feb 2007. Web. 4 Nov. 2010.

Miller, Julie. "Thandie Newton on *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Struggling to Find Her Identity, and Hollywood's Ego Problem." *Vanity Fair*. Vanity Fair. 27 Sept. 2013. Web. 14 Nov. 2015. http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2013/09/thandie-newton-interview

Mims, Sergio. "Color Me Thandie: Actress Thandie Newton talks *Colored Girls*, Stereotypes, and Why She Doesn't Want to Be a Movie Star." *Ebony*. Ebony. n.date. Web. 21 Apr. 2011.

Mission Impossible II: Dir. John Woo. Perf. Tom Cruise, Dougray Scott. Thandie Newton. Paramount Pictures, 2000. Film.

Missouri, Montré Aza. *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex, and Afro-Religiousity*." NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. Print.

Mondello, Bob. "'W.': Taking Aim at a Lame Duck." *NPR*. Website. 17 Oct. 2008. Web. 25 Nov. 2015. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95746285

Morago, Greg. "Still Taboo? The Racial Divide in Film and Tv Has Yet to Close." *Hartford Currant*. courant.com, 25 Mar. 2005. Web. 12 May. 2011. http://articles.courant.com/2005-03-25/features/0503250772_1_black-men-white-women-white-woman

Morris, Wesley. "The Problem of the Black Cast Members on 'SNL'." *Grantland*. 26 Aug. 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2017. http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/saturday-night-live-eddie-murphy-black-castmembers/

Moss, Gabrielle. "The Bridesmaids" Effect: How Did 'Bridesmaids' Change Hollywood." *Bitch Media*. Website. 6 Jun. 2013. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/the-bridesmaids-effect-what-impact-does-bridesmaids-have-on-women-in-hollywood

"Movies: Paul Haggis, *Crash*. *BBC*. Website. 2005. Web. 4 Feb. 2016. http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/07/29/paul_haggis_crash_interview.shtml

Mustich, Emma. "Wiig Rides 'Bridesmaids' Success into New Role." *Salon*. Website. 13 July 2011. 15 May 2015. http://www.salon.com/2011/07/13/kristen_wiig/

"NAACP Image Awards." *NAACP.org*. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. n.d. Web. 9 Sept. 2015. https://action.naacp.org/pages/naacp-image-awards

Nagourney, Adam. "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls." The New York Times. 4 Nov. 2008. Web. 28 Jan. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/us/politics/05elect.html

Nakamura, Lisa. "Mixedfolks.com: 'Ethnic Ambiguity,' Celebrity Outing, and the Internet." *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltran and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. 64-83. Print.

Nakashima, Cynthia L. "Servants of Culture: The Symbolic Role of Mixed-Race Asians in American Discourse." *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Eds. Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001. 35-47. Print.

Neale, Steve. "The Sketch Show." *The Television Genre Book*. 3rd edited by, Glen Creeber. (New York: Palgrave, 2015): Web. 92.

Nelson, Jasmine. “Is Dwayne Johnson Black? Hollywood Doesn’t Seem to Think So.” *Atlanta Blackstar*. Website. 10 June 2015. Web. 6 July 2015. http://atlantablackstar.com/2015/06/10/is-dwayne-johnson-black-hollywood-doesnt-seem-to-think-so/

“Newton Still Upset with Crash Director Over Rape Scene.” *Contact Music*. Website. 13 Feb. 2007. Web. 23 Feb. 2017. http://www.contactmusic.com/thandie-newton/news/newton-still-upset-with-crash-director-over-rape-scene_1021969

Newton, Thandie. “Embracing Otherness, Embracing Myself.” Ted Global. Edinburgh, Scotland. July 2011. Lecture.

Nishime, LeiLani. “Guilty Pleasures: Keanu Reeves, Superman, and Racial Outing.” *East of Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*. Eds. Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren. New York: New York UP, 2005. 273-291. Print.

Nittle, Nadra Kareem. “Stereotypes of Italian Americans In Film and Television.” *AboutNews*. Website. 15 Oct. 2015. Web. 29 Oct. 2015. https://www.thoughtco.com/stereotypes-of-italian-americans-film-television-2834703

Nix, Emily and Nancy Qian. “Is Race a Choice?” *Vox*. Website. 26 Jan. 2015. Web. 1 Jul. 2015. http://voxeu.org/article/race-choice

Novak, Matt. “*Idiocracy* is a Cruel Movie and You Should Be Ashamed for Liking it.” *Paleofuture*. Website. 29 July 2014. Web. 6 Jan. 2016. http://paleofuture.gizmodo.com/idiocracy-is-a-cruel-movie-and-you-should-be-ashamed-fo-1553344189

Nowatzki, Robert. “Blackin Up is Doin’ White Folks Doin’ Us”: Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Performance in Contemporary American Fiction and Film.” *Literature Interpretation Theory*. 18.2 (2007): 115-136. Web.

Nukols, Ben. “Hysterical Silence: Rashida Jones and Race in the Movies.” *Illinformedgadfly*. Website. 19 Mar. 2009. Web. 14 June 2010.

Nussbaum, Emily. “Color Commentary: The Shape-Shifting Masterminds of “Key & Peele.” *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker. 30 Sept. 2013. Web. 6 Jan. 2017. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/color-commentary

O’Hehir, Andrew. “Think Like a Man”: Why Are Rom-Coms Still Segregated?” *Salon*. Salon. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Sept. 2016. http://www.salon.com/2012/04/19/think_like_a_man_why_are_rom_coms_still_segregated/

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

O'Neal, Sean. "Rashida Jones." *A.V. Club*. Website. 8 Apr. 2009. Web. 1 Nov. 2010.

Onwuachi-Willig, Angela. "There's Just One *Hitch*, Will Smith: Examining Title VII, Race, and Casting Discrimination on the Fortieth Anniversary of Loving v. Virginia." 2007 Wis. L. Rev. 319. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web. 8 Feb. 2010. http://www.avclub.com/article/rashida-jones-26240

Ordona, Michael. "'SNL's' Maya Rudolph is a mom in search of a home in 'Away We Go'." *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 4 June 2009. Web. 16 May 2011. http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/04/entertainment/et-performance4

O'Toole, Lesley. "The First Lady." *The Guardian*. Website. 31 Oct. 2008. Web. 25 Nov. 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/nov/01/thandie-newton-condoleezza-rice

Pabst, Naomi. "Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations Over Crossing Signs." *Cultural Critique*. 54 (2003). Web. 178-212.

Page, Janice. "Rashida Jones, Child of Hollywood, Comes into Her Own." *Boston Globe*. Boston Globe, 11. Aug. 2012. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/movies/2012/08/11/rashida-jones-child-hollywood-comes-into-her-own/C2Pi6t8T7D06E4NAGiHI7K/story.html

Palmer, Lori. "The Many Faces of Disinclination: Australian Feminist/Post-Colonialist Reflections on *Flirting*." *Senses of Cinema*, November 2007, accessed June 26, 2017. http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/australian-cinema-45/flirting/.

Parks and Recreation. Writ. Greg Daniels and Michael Schur. Perf. Amy Poehler and Rashida Jones. NBC. KNTV, San Francisco. 2009-2015. Television.

Paskin, Willa. "Network TV is Broken. So How Does Shonda Rhimes Keep Making Hits? *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times Magazine. 9 May 2013. Web. 12 Sept. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/magazine/shonda-rhimes.html

Perlgut, Don. "Notes on the Film *Bridesmaids*." *Don Perlgut's Blog: Reflections on Movies, Books, Media, Culture and Politics*. 12 June 2011. Web. 8 July 2015.

Peterson, Latoya. "Maya Rudolph Stars in Bridesmaids." *Racialicious*. Website. 20 Apr. 2011. Web. 2 July 2015.

Pierpont, Claudia Roth. "A Raised Voice: How Nina Simone Turned the Movement into Music." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker. Website. 11 Aug. 2014. Web. 14 Sept. 2015. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/raised-voice

Pineda-Volk, Robert W. “Exploring the ‘Tragic Mulatto’ Stereotype through Film History. *National Social Science Association*. Website. n.date. 25 July 2015. Web. http://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-12.htm

“Please Don’t Ask, Please Don’t Tell.” *Black-ish*. ABC. 6 May 2015. Television.

Polowy, Kevin. “Q&A: Rashida Jones on Writing, Ron Swanson and Irrationality Over Her Race.” *Nextmovie*. Website. 2 Aug. 2012. 3 Nov. 2015.

Ponder, Reginald. “The Root Interview: Thandie Newton on ‘For Colored Girls.’” *The Root*. Website. 5 Nov. 2010. Web. 1 Dec. 2010. http://www.theroot.com/the-root-interview-thandie-newton-on-for-colored-girls-1790881509

Poniewozik, James. “TV Tonight: Black (Or Not) Like She.” *Time*. Website. 26 Feb. 2009. Web. 8 June 2015. http://entertainment.time.com/2009/02/26/tv-tonight-black-or-not-like-she/

---. “Up All Night, Modern Family and TV’s Feminism for Men.” *Time*. Website. 17 Nov. 2011. Web. 22 June 2015. http://entertainment.time.com/2011/11/17/up-all-night-modern-family-and-tvs-feminism-for-men/

Prince, Richard. “Hatin on ‘Colored Girls.’’ *The Root*. Website. 7 Nov. 2010. Web. 15 May 2015. http://journalisms.theroot.com/hatin-on-colored-girls-1790883731

Private Practice. Creat. Shonda Rhimes. Perf. Kate Walsh. *Shondaland*. (2007-2013). Television.

Ramoutar, Nadia A. *The Color of Love on the Big Screen: The Portrayal of Women in Hollywood Films in Interracial Relationships from 1967-2005*. Diss. U. of Florida, 2006. Web.

Rashida Jones. http://rashidajones.blogspot.com/ Web. 19 Apr. 2011.

Rastogi, Nina Shen. “Please Submit All Ethnicities: The Tricky Business of Writing Casting Notices.” *Slate*. Website. 30 July 2012. 15 Nov. 2015. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/07/casting_and_race_the_tricky_business_of_writing_casting_notices.html

Raven-Symoné (ravensymone). “I can finally get married! Yay government! So proud of you.” 3 Aug. 2013. *Twitter*. Website. 11 Sept. 2015. Web.

---. “Where Are They Now?” Interview with Oprah Winfrey. TV. 5 Oct. 2014. Web. 5 Sept. 2015.

Reid, Mark A. “Black Women and Interracial Love.” *Post Negritude Visual and Literary Culture*. New York: SUNY P. 1997. Web.

"Review: 'For Colored Girls,' The Movie." *The Root*. Website. 3 Nov. 2010. 10 Apr. 2015. http://www.theroot.com/review-for-colored-girls-the-movie-1790881449

Rich, Kathy. "Interview: Away We Go's Carmen Ejogo." *Cinemablend*. Website. 2 June 2009. Web. 6 Aug. 2015. http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-Away-We-Go-Carmen-Ejogo-13388.html

Rivas, Jorge. "Study Finds White People Don't Watch Black Movies. Who's to Blame?" *Colorlines*. Colorlines. 12 July 2011. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. http://www.colorlines.com/articles/study-finds-white-people-dont-watch-black-movies-whos-blame

Robehmed, Natalie. "Vin Diesel: The Film Star of the Future." *Forbes*. Forbes. 29 June 2015. 17 Dec. 2015. https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2015/06/29/vin-diesel-the-film-star-of-the-future/#14f6d0251ca7

Robertson, Carolyn. "Maya Rudolph on Her 70lb Pregnancy Weight Gain." Babycenter. Blog. BabyCenter LLC. 16 May 2009. Web. 24 June 2015.

Robinson, Russell. "Hollywood's Race/Ethnicity and Gender-Based Casting: Prospects for a Title VII Lawsuit." *Latino Policy and Issues Brief* 14 (2006): 1-4. *UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center*. Web. 23 Apr. 2012.

Romanska, Maria and Alan Ackerman. Eds. *Reader in Comedy: An Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017): Web. 1.

Romeo, Danielle. "Maya Rudolph's 10 Best 'SNL' Characters." *Hello Giggles*. Website. 9 Feb. 2012. Web. 8 June 2015. https://hellogiggles.tumblr.com/post/17895441720/maya-rudolphs-10-best-snl-characters

Roscoe, Jane and Craig Higt. *Faking it: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester: Manchester, UP, 2001. Web.

Rosenberg, Alyssa. "Why is it Surprising that White Audiences Turned Out for '*Fruitvale Station*" and '*12 Years a Slave*?'" *ThinkProgress*. Website. 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. https://thinkprogress.org/why-is-it-surprising-that-white-audiences-turned-out-for-fruitvale-station-and-12-years-a-slave-885233d5ce72

Rothman, Lily. "Kerry Washington, Kenan Thompson, and Black Women on *SNL*." *Time*. Time. 17 Oct. 2013. Web. 16 Jan. 2017. http://entertainment.time.com/2013/10/17/kerry-washington-kenan-thompson-and-black-women-on-snl/

Rowles, Dustin. "The Top Five Films Featuring a Black Female in a Leading Role." *Pajiba*. Website. 23 Mar. 2010. Web. 13 July 2015. http://www.pajiba.com/seriously_random_lists/srl-the-top-five-films-featuring-a-black-female-in-a-leading-role.php

Rubin, Lauren A. "The *SNL* Effect: Black Women in Film and TV." *The Harvard Crimson*. The Harvard Crimson. 19 Nov. 2013. Web. 8 June 2015. http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2013/11/19/snl-kerry-washington-jackson-carpio-discussion/

Ryan, Maureen. "Why Are Rob Lowe and Rashida Jones Leaving 'Parks and Rec'? EP Mike Schur Says Decision Was Mutual." *Huffington Post*. Website. 1 Aug. 2013. Web. 8 Nov. 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/01/why-are-rob-lowe-and-rashida-jones-leaving-parks-and-rec-mike-schur_n_3691399.html

Ryzik, Melena. "Breaking the Mold By Writing a Part for Herself." *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 1 Aug. 2012. Web. 24 Aug. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/02/movies/rashida-jones-writes-a-new-part-for-herself.html

Saldana, Zoe. "Bravo! Inspired By Michael's Essay." *Facebook*. Website. 23 May 2015. Web. 23 Sept. 2015.

San Andreas. Dir. Brad Peyton. Perf. Dwayne Johnson. *Warner Bros. Pictures,* 2015. Film.

Santhanam, Larua and Megan Hickey. "Out of 30,000 Hollywood Film Characters, Here's How Many Weren't White." *PBS*. Website. 22 Sept. 2015. Web. 7 Nov. 2015. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/30000-hollywood-film-characters-heres-many-werent-white/

Santopinto, Ana. "My, Oh Maya: Maya Rudolph." *Paper*. Paper. 28 Feb. 2003. Web. 15 Jan. 2017. http://www.papermag.com/my-oh-maya-maya-rudolph-1425150991.html

Saturday Night Live. Creat. Lorne Michaels. NBC. New York. 1975-2016. Television.

Sawlani. Samira. "Film Review: Half Baked Yellow Sun." *Media Diversified*. Website. 18 Oct. 2013. Web. 26 Mar. 2014. https://mediadiversified.org/2013/10/18/half-baked-yellow-sun/

Scandal. Creat. Shonda Rhimes. Perf. Kerry Washington. *ABC Studios. Shondaland*. Television. 2012.

Scherker, Amanda. "Whitewashing was One of Hollywood's Worst Habits. So Why is it Still Happening?" *Huffington Post.* Website. 10 July 2014. Web. 21 Nov. 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/10/hollywood-whitewashing_n_5515919.html

Senna, Danzy. "The Mulatto Millennium." *Half and Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural*. Ed. Claudine Chaiwei O'Hearn. New York: Pantheon, 1998. Print.

Sepinwall, Alan. “Even the Director of ‘Crash’ Wouldn’t Have Voted for it for Best Picture.” *Hitflix*. 11 Aug. 2015. Web. 21 Nov. 2015. http://uproxx.com/sepinwall/even-the-director-of-crash-wouldnt-have-voted-for-it-for-best-picture/

Sergio. “2013 S&A Highlights: Dwayne Johnson – ‘Race Shifter’ In a Post Racial World? *Shadow and Act: On Cinema of the African Diaspora*. 3 Jan. 2014. Web. 6 July 2015.

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf*. 1975. New York: Scribner, 1997. Print.

Sharp, Gwen. “Casting Call Requests African American Actor Who ‘Isn’t too Dark’.” *Sociological Images: The Society Pages*. Website. 19 Apr. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2012. https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/04/19/casting-call-requests-african-american-actor-who-isnt-too-dark/

Shih, David. “The Seduction of Origins: Sui Sin Far and the Race for Tradition.” *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*. Eds. Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2005, 48-76. Print.

Shipley, Diane. “Daddy Issues: The Pursuit of Happyness and the Trouble with the American Dream.” *Bitch Media*. Bitch Magazine. 3 Dec. 2012. Web. 13 May 2015. https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/daddy-issues-the-pursuit-of-happyness-and-the-trouble-with-the-american-dream

Siddiquee, Imran. “Why *Sister Act* is One of the Most Important Movies Ever Made.” *The Representation Project*. Website. 6 Mar. 2014. Web. 29 Dec. 2015. http://therepresentationproject.org/why-sister-act-is-one-of-the-most-important-movies-ever-made

Siegel, Ed. “Love is Becoming Colorblind on Film.” *Chicago Tribune*. Chicago Tribune. 6 July 2000. Web. 28 Sept. 2016. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2000-07-06/features/0007060038_1_race-assimilation-attitudes

Silverstein, Melissa. “Interview with Maya Rudolph – Away We Go.” *Women and Hollywood*. Website. 5 June 2009. Web. 10 May 2011.

Sirota, David. “Oscar Loves a White Savior.” *Salon*. Salon. 21 Feb. 2013. Web. 2 Oct. 2016. http://www.salon.com/2013/02/21/oscar_loves_a_white_savior/

Smith, Zadie. “Brother from Another Mother: Key and Peele’s Chameleon Comedy.” *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker. 23 Feb - 2 Mar. 2015. Web. 6 Jan. 2017. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/brother-another-mother

Smyth, J.E. “Classical Hollywood and the Filmic Writing of Interracial History, 1931-1939. *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. Print. 23-44.

Snitch. Dir. Ric Roman Waugh. Pef. Dwayne Johnson. *Summit Entertainment*, 2013. Film.

Soffel, Jenny. "Half of a Yellow Sun': Thandie Newton, Typhoid and a Tale of Civil War." *CNN*. Website. 21 Oct. 2013. Web. 13 Feb. 2017. http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/21/showbiz/half-of-a-yellow-sun/index.html

Something New. Dir. Sanaa Hamri. Perf. Sanaa Lathan. *Focus Features*, 2006. Film.

Strausbaugh, John. *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult & Imitation in American Popular Culture*. (New York: Tarcher, 2007): 19. Print.

Sudan, Rajani. "Girl Erupted." *Reload: Rethinking Women and Cyberculture*. Eds. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth. Cambridge: MA, MIT P. 2002. 355-372. Print.

Tau, Byron. "Black Actor to Finally Play Obama on SNL." *Politico*. Website. 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 16 Jan. 2017. http://www.politico.com/blogs/politico44/2012/09/black-actor-to-finally-play-obama-on-snl-135404

That's So Raven. Creat. Michael Poryes. Perf. Raven-Symoné. *Disney Channel Original Productions*. 2003-2007. Television.

The Best Man Holiday. Dir. Malcolm D. Lee. Perf. Taye Diggs, Sanaa Lanthan. *Universal Pictures*. 2013. Film.

The Cheetah Girls. Dir. Oz Scott. Perf. Raven-Symoné. *Walt Disney Pictures*. 2003, 2006, 2008. Film.

The Cosby Show. Creat. Ed Weinberger, Michael Leeson, Bill Cosby. Perf. Bill Cosby, Phylicia Rashad. *NBC*. (*Viacom Enterprises*. 1984-1992): Television.

The Fast and The Furious (franchise). Dir. Rob Cohen, John Singleton, Justin Lin, James Wan, F. Gary Gray. Perf. Vin Diesel, Paul Walker, Dwayne Johnson. Universal Pictures, 2001-2015. Film.

The L Word. Writ. Irene Chaiken. Perf. Jennifer Beals, Laurel Holloman, Mia Kirshner. Showtime. Vancouver, BC and Los Angeles, CA. 2004-2009. Television.

"The Merger." *The Office*: Season Three Episode Eight. Writ. Brent Forrester. Dir. Ken Whittingham. NBC. KNTV, San Francisco. 16 Nov. 2006. Television.

The Office. Dev. Greg Daniels. Perf. Steve Carell, Rainn Wilson. *NBC Universal Television Distribution*. 2005-2013. Television.

The Pursuit of Happyness. Dir. Gabriele Muccino. Perf. Will Smith, Jaden Smith, Thandie Newton. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

"The Razzies." Website. 1980–2017. *The Golden Raspberry Awards (Razzie®) Awards*, LLC. 18 May 2017. http://www.razzies.com/

The Slanted Screen. Dir. Jeff Adachi. Perf. Mako, Cary Hiroyuki Tagawa, James Shigeta. AAMM Productions. 2006. DVD.

The Truth about Charlie. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Perf. Mark Wahlberg and Thandie Newton. Universal Pictures, 2002. Film.

The Way Way Back. Dir. Nat Faxon and Jim Rash. Perf. Liam James, Steve Carell, Toni Collette. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013. Film.

"The World's Highest-Paid Actresses 2015." *Forbes*. Forbes. 20 Aug. 2015. Web. 11 Nov. 2015. https://www.forbes.com/pictures/emjl45eddhj/the-worlds-highest-paid-/#106c300f2057

Thilk, Chris. "Movie Marketing Madness: Bridesmaids. *Christhilk.com*. Website. 11 May 2011. Web. 13 Jan. 2017. https://christhilk.com/2011/05/11/movie-marketing-madness-bridesmaids/

---. "Movie Marketing Madness: I Love You, Man. *Christhilk.com*. Website. 19 Mar. 2009. Web. 13 Jan. 2017. https://christhilk.com/2009/03/19/movie-marketing-madness-i-love-you-man/

Thorp. Brandon K. "What Does the Academy Value in a Black Performance?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 19 Feb. 2016. Web. 16 Sept. 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/movies/what-does-the-academy-value-in-a-black-performance.html

Tigget, Jasmine. "Review: Rashida Jones Stars in 'Celeste and Jesse Forever' (in Theaters Today. *Indiewire*. Website. 2012. 5 June. 2016. http://www.indiewire.com/2012/08/review-rashida-jones-stars-in-celeste-and-jesse-forever-in-theaters-today-143387/

Tobias, Scott. *The Pursuit of Happyness*. *A.V. Club*. Website. 14 Dec. 2006. 9 Oct. 2016.

Topel, Fred. "Thandie Newton on *The Pursuit of Happyness*." *CanMag*. Website. 12 Dec. 2006. Web. 11 Apr. 2015. http://www.canmag.com/news/4/3/6061

Trundle, Sean. (2013). "Hope and Anxiety on the Endless Frontier: Scientists, State Policy and the Popular Imagination. (Doctoral dissertation). *Proquest*, 3572462.

*Tvtropes.org. Website. "*Tv Tropes: Characters: Parks and Recreation." Tv Tropes By Tv Tropes Foundation, LLC. n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.

Tyler, Josh. "*Idiocracy* Review." *Cinemablend*. Website. n.d. 6 Jan. 2016. Web. http://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Idiocracy-1775.html

Ufberg, Jeffrey. "Maya Rudolph Jokes about 70 Pound Weight Gain." *People*. People. 15 May 2009. Web. 24 June 2015. http://celebritybabies.people.com/2009/05/15/maya-rudolph-jokes-about-70-pound-weight-gain/

Up All Night. Creat. Emily Spivey. Perf. Christina Applegate, Will Arnett, Maya Rudolph. *NBC Universal Television Distribution*. 2011. *Amazon*. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

Urban Dictionary. "frenemy." Urban Dictionary. 3 Jan. 2005. Web. 20 June 2011.

Urkel, S.Q. "Rashida Jones, Incognegroes, and the New Passing." *Afropunk*. Website. 12 Mar. 2009. Web. 20 June 2016.

USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "Whiteness." *The Critical Media Project*. Website. *n.d.* 6 June. 2016. http://www.criticalmediaproject.org/cml/topicbackground/race-ethnicity/white/

U.S. Census Bureau. 2010 Census Data. National Population By Race. Census.Gov. Website. 2010. Web. 13 Oct. 2015. https://www.census.gov/2010census/data/

Valdivia, Angharad N. "Mixed race on the Disney Channel: From Johnnie Tsunami *through* Lizzie McGuire *and Ending with* The Cheetah Girls." *Mixed race Hollywood*. Eds. Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas. New York: New York UP, 2008. 271-272. Print.

Valier, Naima. "Boycott The Nina Simone Movie!!!" *Change.org*. Website. 2012. Web. 16 Sept. 2015. https://www.change.org/p/boycott-the-nina-simone-movie

Vega, Tanzina. "Stir Builds Over Actress to Portray Nina Simone." *The New York Times*. The New York Times. 12 Sept. 2012. Web. 17 Sept. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/movies/should-zoe-saldana-play-nina-simone-some-say-no.html

Vendantam, Shankar. "Shades of Prejudice." *New York Times*. New York Times, 18 Jan. 2010. Web. 6 July 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19vedantam.html

Ventre, Michael. "Black Stars Don't Mean Hollywood is Color-blind." *Today*. Website. 4 Feb. 2010. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. http://www.today.com/id/35146945/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/black-stars-dont-mean-hollywood-color-blind/#.WVQUhxP1BTY

Vo, Hung. "Is *The Pursuit of Happyness* Inaccurate?" *The Huffington Post*. Website. 26 June 2012. Web. 9 Oct. 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hung-vo/is-the-pursuit-of-happyne_b_1625130.html

Von Tunzelmann, Alex. "Jefferson in Paris: A Founding Father Tale That's No Slave to the Truth." *The Guardian*. Website. 4 Feb. 2010. Web. 20 Nov. 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/feb/04/reel-history-jefferson-in-paris

W. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Josh Brolin. Elizabeth Banks. Lionsgate, 2008. Film.

Walker, Rebecca "Introduction." *An Anthology of Short Fiction on the Multiracial Experience*. Ed. Chandra Prasad. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). 14. Print.

Walls, Jeannette. "Was Race an Issue in 'Hitch' Casting?" *Today Entertainment*. Website. 24 Feb. 2005. Web. 3 Aug. 2015. http://www.today.com/popculture/was-race-issue-hitch-casting-wbna7019342

Warn, Sarah. "Introduction." *Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*. Eds. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006. Print.

Waters, Mary C. "Optional Ethnicities: For Whites Only?" *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. 5th ed. Eds. Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004. Print. 419-427.

Watkins, Mel. "What Was a Blackface Minstrel Show?" *PBS*. Website. 1999-2000. Web. 12 Jan. 2016.

Watson, Elwood. "Lena Dunham: The Awkward/Ambiguous Politics of White Millennial Feminism." *HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege*. Eds. Elwood Watson, Jennifer Mitchell, and Marc Edward Shaw. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015. Web. 145-166.

Weaver, Andrew T. "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies." *Journal of Communication*. Journal of Communication 61 (2011): 369-385. Web. 14 July 2015.

Weedon, Chris. *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging.* (Berkshire, England: Open UP, 2004): Web. 127.

Weller, Sheila. "Are you white or are you black?" *Glamour*. June 2005: 244-47, 259, 267. Print.

"Why White Cinema-Goers Are Less Likely to Watch Movies With a Black Lead Actor." *Daily Mail*. Associated Newspapers Ltd. 12 May 2011. Web. 13 July 2015. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1386096/White-cinema-goers-prefer-movies-cast-similar-race-says-study.html

Williams, Brennan. "Zoe Saldana on Nina Simone Criticism: 'I Didn't Think I Was Right for the Part'." *Huffpost: Black Voices*. Website. 11 June 2015. Web. 22 Sept. 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/11/zoe-saldana-nina-simone-criticism_n_7564452.html

Williams, Kam. "Rashida Jones –"The I Love You, Man Interview. *African American Literature Book Club*. Website. n.d. Web. 7 June. 2016. http://aalbc.com/reviews/rashida_jones.htm

---. "Thandie Newton – The Crash Interview." *African American Literature Book Club*. Website. n.d. Web. 26 Apr. 2011. http://aalbc.com/reviews/thandie_newton.htm

---."Thandie Newton: The 'For Colored Girls' Interview." *The Sly Fox Film Reviews*. 8 Nov. 2010. Web. 26 Apr. 2011.

Williams, Monnica. "Colorblind Ideology is a Form of Racism." *Psychology Today*. Website. 27 Dec. 2011. Web. 6 July 2016. https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culturally-speaking/201112/colorblind-ideology-is-form-racism

Williams, Stereo. "Common, Pharrell, and 'The New Black': An Ignorant Mentality That Undermines the Black Experience." *The Daily Beast*. Website. 19 Mar. 2015. Web. 18 Sept. 2015. http://rollingout.com/2013/11/21/best-man-holiday-fell-flat-white-audiences-black-people-care/

---. "*The Best Man Holiday* Fell Flat With White Audiences, Should Black People Care?" *Rollingout*. Website. 21 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Jan. 2016. http://rollingout.com/2013/11/21/best-man-holiday-fell-flat-white-audiences-black-people-care/

Williams-León, Teresa and Cynthia Nakashima. "Reconfiguring Race, Rearticulating Ethnicity." *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*. Eds. Teresa Williams-León and Cynthia Nakashima. (Philadelphia: Temple U.P.): 4. Print.

Wingfield, Adia Harvey. "Color-blindness is Counterproductive. *The Atlantic*. The Atlantic. 23 Sept. 2015. Web. 7 Sept. 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/color-blindness-is-counterproductive/405037

Witherspoon, Chris. "Maya Rudolph Defies Racial Types in 'Bridesmaids'." *theGrio*. 13 May 2011. Web. 8 June 2015. http://thegrio.com/2011/05/13/maya-rudolph-continues-to-defy-racial-typecasting-in-bridesmaids/

---. "Raven-Symoné Responds to Critics: 'I Never Said I Wasn't Black.'" *theGrio*. Website. 7 Oct. 2014. Web. 10 Sept. 2015. http://thegrio.com/2014/10/07/raven-symone-african-american-black/

Wolfe, Alexandra. "The Real Maya Rudolph." *The Wall Street Journal*. The Wall Street Journal. 3 June 2016. Web. 6 Jan. 2017. https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-real-maya-rudolph-1464979398

Wong, Kristina, "Unpopular Opinion: 6 Reasons Why Your Utopic Vision for a Mixed-Race Future is My Nightmare." *XOJane*. Website. 10 Dec. 2014. Web. 15 Dec. 2014. http://www.xojane.com/issues/your-mixed-race-utopia-is-my-nightmare

Wooten, James T. "Compact Set Up for 'Post-Racial' South. *New York Times*. New York Times. 5 Oct. 1971. Web. 1 Sept. 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/1971/10/05/archives/compact-set-up-for-postracial-south.html

"Working Late and Working it." *Up All Night*. Season One Episode Three. Creator. Emily Spivey. Exec Producer. NBC, 2011. DVD.

Yates, Kimberly A. "When 'Keeping it Real' Goes Right." *The Comedy of Dave Chappelle: Critical Essays*. Ed. K.A. Wisniewski. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, INC., 2009. 139-155. ebook.

Zehme, Bill. "It Came from Chicago." *Spy Magazine*. Dec. 1986, pp. 30-32.

Zibart, Eve. "Jefferson in Paris." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post. 7 Apr. 1995. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/jeffersoninparispg13zibart_c01065.htm